

Ashland Brethren in Christ Church  
September 24th, 2023

Sermon Title: A Tale of Two Pastors

Scriptures: Matt 22:24-30, 28:16-20

Key themes of the message will center on the Great Commandment and love, how love is the most important element of our life in Christ, foundational for the Great Commission, and how we are invited into rhythms of rest and relationship even as we carry out the work of the gospel.

Short Bio:

Karen Reaume moved to Ashland in 2017 to pursue a Masters of Divinity degree at Ashland Theological Seminary. Upon graduation she joined the staff and currently serves as the Associate Program Director for Grant Programs. One of her key programs is Thriving in Church Ministries, a program that helps pastors develop habits and practices that lead to long-term thriving in ministry. She has four grown children, three are married, and one grandson, all living in Michigan.

## MESSAGE

I recently attended a conference of pastors and church leaders. During one of the sessions after hearing from a panel of pastors, the moderator asked the panelists what one piece of advice they would share with the group. One of the pastors challenged the group to really step up their game and work harder! He shared how he never sleeps more than four hours a night, and his wife chimed in, with smiling enthusiasm, that often it was less!

Now, maybe he has a special call from God - I want to acknowledge that is possible. Or perhaps he has a constitution that allows him to operate on so little sleep. Or maybe he has just accustomed himself to live this way. I don't know.

But he did say why he does this. His basic points were ones I have heard from many leaders - the devil doesn't sleep so neither should we! There is so much work to be done! Souls!

My heart sank. I know how this ends. I've been there and done that. It ends in burnout!

And worse yet, no matter how many scriptures you try and pluck to put with this approach, it's a direct violation of scripture. In Genesis 1, we see God choosing to rest, creating a model for how creation is designed to work. In the pre-fall world, in the perfect design of creation, there is a regular rhythm of rest.

Okay, so what about now? What about after the fall? Surely NOW we have to be all about work, right?! No ...

In Exodus we see God liberate his people from the oppressive labor of pharaoh, and then we see Sabbath rest codified into the essential commands of how we are to live. Why oh why do leaders still not only violate this command but champion others to do the same in name of the Great Commission?

You, friends, are NOT these people! I know we are only just now meeting one another, but I have come to love you because I see how you have treated your pastor, my friend Keith. I know how he has been blessed by you and your church's leadership to participate in my Thriving in Church Ministry program. And I know how you have blessed him and Kathy by providing him with a wonderful sabbatical. I rejoiced to see his well-rested, rejuvenated face a few weeks back.

In reflecting on these two experiences I began to think about the tale of two pastors and the TWO great callings of the gospel on our lives as Christians.

Like the first pastor, we know we are called to the Great Commission (Mat 28:16–24, Mar 16:14–18)

Turn with me if you will to Matthew 28 beginning in verse 16:

16 Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. 17 When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. 18 Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. 19 Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely, I am with you always, to the very end of the age." [Mat 28:16-20 NIV]

Jesus ends his earthly mission by instructing his disciples to carry on as he has prepared them to. Go, spread the good news! What you have received, invite others into. ....

But this is not the only “great” the gospel gives us. This is the commission speech, the **invitation to co-mission with Jesus**. We get to invite others into relationship with Jesus. We get to extend his invitation of eternal life.

And that is a BIG DEAL. But is it the BIGGEST deal?

There is another Great in our scriptures, what we refer to as The Great Commandment. Let's take a look at it in Matthew's text - Matthew 22 starting in verse 34

34 Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together. 35 One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question: 36 "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?" 37 Jesus replied: " 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' 38 This is the first and greatest commandment. 39 And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments." [Mat 22:34-40 NIV]

ALL the law and the prophets can be summed up in these two commands, all the instructions, all the wisdom, in Luke's version, the way to eternal life are found in LOVE.

So, this is what I have been reflecting on, which GREAT is GREATER??

I keep hearing echoes of Tina Turner - what's love got to do with it? Well, Tina, I think the correct answer is EVERYTHING.

I fear that if we follow the advice of the first pastor we risk getting so consumed by the Great Commission, that we risk losing sight of the Great Commandment, and that is a potentially fatal flaw.

We prioritize the work of the kingdom over the love of the kingdom and the new life it brings. We sacrifice the sleep our body needs, or maybe less dramatically the nutrition and exercise. We sacrifice undo amounts of family time, undervaluing the relationships in our lives. We don't give loving care to others or to ourselves.

And to that I say:

**If carrying out the Great Commission causes us to lose sight of the Great Commandment, we're doing it wrong!**

If we say we are doing it because we love God, but we are neglecting to love and care for ourselves, we're doing it wrong.

If we say we're doing it to save lost souls but are neglecting the souls of our spouses, family, and friends, we're doing it wrong.

I think sometimes we confuse making converts with making disciples.

I think it's a weakness we can find in our modern evangelistic mindset ... these ideas that put so much focus on a moment of decision that we can lose sight of the process of becoming that was happening before that moment and continues to happen after ...

The problem then becomes that we focus a disproportionate amount of our time on trying to make those moments happen and we lack time and energy for all the relational work that is what ACTUALLY creates the environment for these moments to happen

Maybe we could think of it this way ...

When a person is born in the natural, there is the moment of birth, and it's a big deal and we celebrate, as we should, but BIRTH is just a moment of transition. There was a whole period of gestation where life was being coaxed and nurtured into being. Then

after the moment of birth there will sixty, seventy, eighty or more years of growth and life - of becoming.

We are all familiar I'm sure with stories of the parent who works long hours, week in and week out, who misses ball games and choir concerts, who takes work on vacation, who never has time to stop and play with their child ...

... causing the child to question whether the parent loves them

... and the parent tries to explain of course they love their child - this is why they work so hard, so many hours, to provide so many material things for the child – and all of that may be true, IS true to some extent, the child does have material needs ... BUT ...

... but more importantly, the child has relational needs!

The parent may deeply want their child to grow up feeling safe and secure, their needs met, able to then have a stable life and start a family of their own ... pass on the family name ...

But did they disciple their child in LOVE ... into LOVE? Did they train up their child to see that they are lovely, lovable, and teach them to care for themselves well?

Did they teach their child to receive healthy love from God and others and to generously give that love to others?

Has the child's family experience been so filled with love that they cannot NOT imagine turning around and creating that sort of environment for themselves and a family of their own?

You see when we put love first, it has a crazy ability to multiply itself!

When we fail to put love first, when we prioritize working for the ones we love instead of working with, spending time with, caring for ... well, yoke is no longer easy, the burden no longer light ...

We don't work LESS when we put love first. Ask any parent! We work DIFFERENTLY.

So how does it look to put the Great Commandment first, and let the Great Commission follow?

If I get up today and put my focus on loving God - which can look like a lot of things, but it is never less than loving what God loves - us ... the world ...

It's football season so we all remember John 3:16, right?

For God so love the world ... that he sent his son ... that whosoever believes in him would have eternal life ...

Remember - eternal life is tied to what? Yep - LOVE ...

So, I get up tomorrow, and I take seriously the command to first, love myself well. That really is a big deal, y'all. I have to know how much God loves me, and I have to love myself well, because however much – or little – I am rooted and grounded in that love ... that is how well I will love YOU!

So, I commit to loving myself well so that I can love my neighbor well ...

Who's my neighbor? We know this one, right? The great Samaritan story is part of Luke's rendition of the Great Commandment ... these two passages go hand in hand ... again, putting the Great Commandment first does not mean we don't work, even sacrificially, it just changes the order of operations, and it takes a more holistic approach.

So ... I learn to love myself well so I can love EVERYONE else well ... because I love God and God loves them ...

Then from those relationships of love, it becomes natural to help people understand God's love for them!

We create environments that foster growing in love ... for God, others, and self ... which IS discipleship ... this is the life we are to train in, this is the becoming we were welcomed into...

You know what else this means? This means we ALL get to participate in making disciples ALL the time. Whether we are being directly evangelistic or not, whether we get to be the person who helps another person declare their love and commitment to Jesus or whether we are just a part of the process of creating the environment that helps them move toward that moment or grow after that moment ...

We are all in the game!

We ARE all needed in the game. We all have A role to play. Some take the lead in the evangelistic role, which is obviously an important role, just like the doctors and nurses in labor and delivery are vital to the process of new birth. But they have no role to play apart from the love that conceived a child and all the loving people who will raise that child.

We are all in the game ...

And if we are ALL in the game, then you can a decent night's sleep most nights. And you can go to your child's ball game. And you have a regular date night. You had better do that! And you can have dinner with your friends or a new neighbor.

There is this story that I love about Smith Wigglesworth, a famous British evangelist from the late 1800's to the mid 1900's. He never felt threatened by the devil. There is a story that says that "On one occasion Wigglesworth awoke during the night aware of a satanic presence. Looking across the room, he saw the Devil himself standing there. Wigglesworth said to Satan, 'Oh, it's only you.' Then he turned over and went back to sleep."

I want to say to the first pastor, it's okay, go to sleep. You are not in this alone. If you're up fighting the devil at 4 am ... maybe that's your choice, not your job ... the devil will be happy to engage you, but to what end?!

Don't let the Great Commission kill the Great Commandment. Don't substitute work, even work done in the name of love, for the actual relational expression of love.

Love ... and let love do the work.

Now ... go in peace to love. Love God. Love others. Love yourself. Come to know how great God's love is - for you and for all creation - that you cannot NOT multiply it wherever you may be!