

**“The Three Must Dos”**  
**Matthew 22:35-40; 28:16-20**  
**Ephesians 4:11-16**  
**10/7/18**

Have you ever gone to an event under duress, only to discover you totally enjoyed it, and ended eating crow for all your false assumptions? Don't you hate it when that happens? Last week our District sponsored a resourcing event for clergy and leaders of small churches. It was one in which I had zero interest in attending. So much so that I asked my ever responsible wife, only half seriously, if either she or I could suddenly take ill and miss the event. In my mind the illness would conveniently leave just about the time the event would be over. Those of you who know Barbara know that if she says she will do something, she will do it. She helps keep me honest about such things. It is one of the things I love and admire in her. And so we attended the Conference. With all my heart I wish some of you had attended with me. It was that good.

The theme was Ministry in a small church, a category that describes JLUMC. Anyway, the Conference speaker was introduced. His name is Karl Vaters. He is a pastor of a small church, a respected and sought after lecturer and teacher, author, and writer of numerous Blogs. Once the introduction was complete he got to the meat of the day. His earliest words rang a bell in my head. These are not his exact words, but they more than capture those words.

***Small is not a problem, nor is it a virtue, nor is it an excuse.***

He had my attention immediately. I could have said the same words, so firmly do I believe them. I immediately related because it is the statement many of you have heard me say before. “We may be small, but we are mighty, even as we are relevant.” The question Vaters posed is one I wrestle with to this day. It is the question of knowing how to lead a small church that is not a problem, nor a virtue, nor an excuse. How do we prevent this from happening? Karl Vaters got quickly to the point in answering the question.

There are, he said, three essentials for a healthy church. Any church that seeks to be healthy has three things on its “Must Do” list.

All three are deeply rooted in the teachings of Jesus. The first is paying close attention to ***The Great Commandment***. Churches, small, large, or anywhere in between, are not a problem, nor a virtue, nor an excuse. If they understand the

implications of this great commandment, which is set in the context of the Pharisees putting Jesus to the test. Matthew portrays the Pharisees as more committed to the Law than they are to Jesus' more progressive ideas about a right relationship with God. To that end they ask Jesus, ***Teacher, which Commandment in the Law is the greatest?*** Their motivation for that question is somewhat murky. They are seeking to have him look less important, less certain, having to choose from among so many others laws. Jesus, as we know, rises to the occasion. Here is what he tells them, and tells us.

***You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This the greatest and first commandment.***

***And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.***

***On these commandments hang all the law and the prophets.***

These Commandments clearly say if we are to love God we are to love our neighbors as God defines neighbors. Which is to say we love everyone, regardless of where they come from, what language they speak, what religion, if any, they follow, what political party they favor, what sexual orientation they are, etc. Neighbor means everyone. They also imply, from where I sit, that there is no litmus test to enter the fellowship of Jesus, the community we call Church. There is no litmus test for full inclusion in the Church. Questions of race, ethnicity, orientation or other potential barriers to membership and ordination and other rites of the Church are subservient to that of Loving God and neighbor. All rules are subservient to the rule of Love.

The second must do is living into **The Great Commission**. The writer of Matthew (or a later writer) reports the Risen Jesus telling his eleven remaining apostles to ***Go therefore and make disciples of all nations...and remember I am with you always, to the end of the age.*** The budding Church early understood its mission. Disciples, those who would follow Jesus, would always be needed. New people would be required to carry out the Great Commandment. Without ever new disciples the hope of God's realm on earth would not be kept alive. The Church's task to create new disciples in every time and place, was and is its ***Great Commission***.

Something else I heard this past weekend stays with me. "Don't do what your forebears did, think the way they thought." It reminds me that we will have to do things differently than we once did, but the reason for doing so is constant. We are not called to preserve the institution and its habits as they were. We are not called to do what our forebears did. We are called to think as they thought in a new time

and circumstance. How we do that remains to be seen. But that we make disciples is a "Must Do" if we are to be faithful to our calling. We must help ourselves and others to see our purpose. We must make and call new disciples.

Which brings us to the third "must do". We must equip new disciples, even as we reequip ourselves. The writer of Ephesians tells us what this **Must do** looks like.

***We must no longer be children, tossed to and fro and blown about.... We must Speak the truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head...from whom the whole body joined and knit together....and promote the body's growth in building itself up in love.***

Size does not matter. Seeking to be faithful witnesses to the love of the God we know in Jesus is what matters. This World Communion Sunday is a clear statement. The worldwide Church consists of small congregations and large congregations and every size in between. In fact the majority of them are as small, if not smaller than ours.

Knowing that small is not a problem, nor a virtue, nor an excuse can keep us mighty and relevant. We can always live out the **Great Commandment**, no matter our size. We can always live into the **Great Commission**, no matter our size. And we can always equip new disciples as well as to reequip ourselves toward those ends, if we (in the words of the generation in which I became a teenager) **Keep the Faith, baby.**

So love God, love our neighbor, witness to and train other like hearted people, and watch how the God of Love becomes known in the world around us.