

Matthew 22:34-40

What do Tina Turner, The Beatles and Jesus have in common?

October 26, 2014 The 30th Sunday in Ordinary Time

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When Tina Turner sarcastically asked, *What's love got to do with it?* The Beatles joyfully answered, *Love is all you need.* But then Emmylou Harris mournfully reminded us, *Love hurts.* And Bono replied, *but I did what I did before love came to town.* I could go on like this but for your sake I won't.

Love is such a common word that no one really knows what it means but we all know that it's important. When a lawyer asked Jesus which of the 613 laws in Torah is the greatest commandment, Jesus responded without hesitation, *Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul and all your mind. The second step is to love your neighbor as yourself.* Then as if to emphasize its importance, Jesus says, *Everything hangs on love.* Everything.

This morning I will offer the final stewardship sermon before we consecrate our financial pledges next Sunday on All Saints' Day. You do know we are consecrating our pledges next Sunday, right? Today's sermon is the *closer*. **I'm not going to ask you merely to support a religious institution. I'm not going to ask you merely to meet a budget goal and then describe the dire consequences if we don't. I am going to ask that you give all that you can joyfully in response to God's love for you. All that you and I do is in response to what God is doing in us, through us and for us.** So there you have it; I've given you the sermon before I've even begun the closing arguments.

There is no better text than Jesus' reminder that *everything* hangs on love. Our congregation has a vision announced in the phrase: **Spirit and Service**. We seek to be a congregation where **spiritual growth** (*Christian formation*) and **service** to our neighbors is the primary way of pursuing God's call in our life together. I think it echoes Jesus' reminder to love God and love neighbor, even as we love ourselves. The last of these three loves is often the one we forget to our great detriment. I find it wonderful and frankly astonishing that of the 613 laws, Jesus zeroed in on this command from the Leviticus reminding us that love is the heart of everything. Our congregation - the one to whom you belong - is seeking to be a community of Jesus' followers that puts love for God, love for neighbor and love for ourselves at the very center of everything. Do I believe this is a gift of God to be honored and celebrated in this shattered, violence ridden world filled with conflict, fear, loneliness and anxiety? Dang right! Don't you?

And yes, I think it is a joy to give our money generously in response to this gift that God has given us here at Saint Mark. Your support enables our congregation to be a beacon of love in this world.

My friend and colleague Jan Edmiston is a consultant for Chicago Presbytery. She asks of every congregation she visits three questions:

- why does your church exist?
- if your church vanished, who would notice?
- what does your church worship more than God?

I've tried answer the first question this way: *we exist as a community of faith where the three great loves are deeply integrated in our life together: love of God, neighbor and self.*

But would anyone notice if Saint Mark vanished? I decided to ask our local partners in ministry and to whom we contribute over \$45,000 in financial support. Here is what a few said:

Shane Rock Director of Interfaith Works said: *If there were no Saint Mark, there would be fewer volunteers feeding the homeless, clothing those in need, and offering a helping hand to our neighbors without hope. There would be less money to do the vital work of helping the impoverished to become independent. Without the partnership of Saint Mark congregation, Interfaith Works could not hope to end homeless and poverty in Montgomery County. With Saint Mark, together we can."*

Jennifer Schiller said: *I can say with confidence, on behalf of Montgomery County Coalition for the Homeless (MCCH), we would **notice** if Saint Mark vanished. Saint Mark has supported our programs serving chronically homeless individuals with severe mental illness for many years. Saint Mark members have been advocates for homeless children, families and individuals helping to secure emergency resources. The time and pastoral leadership Saint Mark provides to the vital issues of our community would be deeply missed. Thank you for a remarkable partnership.*

James Pearlstein of AIM said: *If Saint Mark vanished, the DREAM Act would not have passed, thousands of low-income Montgomery County families would not have affordable homes, and the county would not be doing a ribbon-cutting at the brand new Scotland Community Center on November 1st! And while I would miss the church building--AIM uses it all the time--it could be replaced. The people at Saint Mark are absolutely irreplaceable.*

Kathleen Guinan of the Crossway Community wrote: *If Saint Mark vanished hundreds of families in our community of vulnerable mothers and their young children would have been*

abandoned and forgotten. Over the past 20 plus years your supportive presence provides a constant witness of the love God has for all families.

Rabbi Greg Harris said, *“Saint Mark is an important voice in Jewish-Christian conversations and most recently, the church has been a strong leader on addressing gun violence.*

David Eisner the Founder of The Institute of Musical Traditions said, *”One of the finest partnerships between a house of worship and a 501C3 live music non-profit would vanish with you. From the mundane of having a safe place to store equipment to the heroic lifting of voices together in song, the world of The Institute of Musical Traditions would be devalued if you vanished.”*

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Last week I asked our deacons and ruling elders - the spiritual leaders of the church - what makes membership in this congregation meaningful. Here is what they said: [see VIDEO on the website].

I'll ask you the question I asked our partners: *would you notice if Saint Mark vanished from your life? Is it valuable enough to give generously in response to what God has given you here?*

Now I come to the close that I've already given away. This is your opportunity to give generously to God in gratitude for a community of faith that makes you come alive, that is seeking to love for God, neighbor and ourselves, and provides a spiritual home for you and your family.

Isn't all of this a reason to give all the money you can in response to all that God is doing among us and through us at Saint Mark? I am asking as I said I would for you to give as generously as possible and come prepared on All Saints' Day to consecrate our lives and our pledges to the glory of God.