



# FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

## “Love from Cover to Cover”

Scripture Lessons: *Psalm 51:1; Peter 4:8-11*

*This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday,  
October 23, 2022 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in  
Charleston, South Carolina.*

What is the most important thing in your life? It should come as no surprise to know that a person's age will undoubtedly influence their answer to that question.

Take school aged children, for example. I don't know that they would be able to put it into words, but I imagine that very high on their list would be the stability of their family / the peace that comes from knowing that they are safe and secure.

As the years go by, and as our children become more cognizant of relationships beyond the family, other people, and other people's opinions; well, they begin to matter a great deal as well.

I remember a particular episode from the Simpsons. Bart, looking adoringly to his father for a nugget of parental advice, says...

“I was wondering, how important is it to be popular?” His father, Homer, rather predictably, I would add, responded with just the worst kind of advice... “I'm glad you asked, son. Being popular is the most important thing in the world.”

So, what is the most important thing? What do we value above everything else? I suppose a young couple just starting out might say that providing for their family is the most important thing, whereas someone a little bit older might say that the most important thing they could do is to put enough money into savings so that they could retire comfortably.

No matter what our age, we all prioritize the things that are important to us, and if anyone should ever doubt that some things are more important than others, or if they can't seem to figure out what is the most important thing to them...all they need to do is look at their bank statement; indeed, the things that are important to us often show up there!

As a church, we too make decisions to put our money here or there / to emphasize this ministry of that one. And I have to tell you that I have a privileged vantage point, because, as a Pastor and as a member of the Session, I have the opportunity to observe the work of all our committees.

I see the Property Committee grappling with what it takes to be good stewards of this amazing sanctuary, and I see them working to ensure that First (Scots) continues to be not only a sacred place for worship, but also for youth groups and neighborhood association meetings and on and on it goes.

I sometimes find myself with members of the Personnel Committee, determining the right size and shape of our staff / our ministry model, as it were -- prayerfully considering how we can provide living and competitive wages to our “missionaries down the hall” as I like to call them

And speaking of mission, the members of our local and world mission committees, they are constantly about the business of how we can serve God and make a difference in Charleston and

the world.

I have no doubt that if we asked a member of one of our mission committees or a member of our Christian Education Committee or a member of the Congregational Care Committee or any other committee...my guess is that they would tell you that theirs is some of the most important work that we are doing...and they are right.

But what is the most important thing? To the early Christians who were facing persecution for their faith, and who were often harassed and slandered and beaten, and who perhaps wondered to themselves, "What is the most important thing I can do as a child of God as I wait for the triumph of God's grace?"

Well, in our NT Lesson this morning, Peter tells them. He says, "Above all" which implies that of all that Peter had penned to them in this first letter of his...for all that he had referenced about being serious and watchful and prayerful and disciplined... "Above all," he says...

Above all, maintain not a little love or a passing love or a brotherly kind of love, but rather maintain for one another a constant and fervent and "agape" love -- the kind of love that God has for us!

But why is bearing witness to that kind of love so important? I mean, of all the things that we are called to do as faithful followers of Jesus Christ, why does Peter choose to highlight love as the most foundational virtue for our life and our life lived together?

Well, I think part of it has to do with the fact that Peter speaks from experience. You see, Peter knows something of what it means to live in a community of faith, and while he undoubtedly knows moments of triumph, he also knows moments of struggle and loss.

Remember, it was Peter -- who Jesus called "the Rock" -- it was Peter who would deny Jesus three times before the rooster crowed on the morning of the crucifixion. Three times Peter would effectively say, "I don't know what you are talking about. I don't know the man."

Imagine how dejected Peter must have felt after Jesus was crucified and buried / when he thought that Jesus was dead and gone. Imagine how utterly heartbroken Peter must have felt to know that the last time he ever laid eyes on his Lord was in the courtyard of the High Priest / that place where, after his third denial, the Bible tells us that, "The Lord turned and looked at Peter." Oh, the shame Peter must have felt.

When Adam and Eve experienced their own kind of sin -- when sin first came into the world (...a sin that we inherit) -- do you remember what happened next? Adam and Eve realized that they were naked, and so they sewed fig leaves together and made for themselves coverings...they covered themselves!

From the very beginning, sin has come with a price...a price that needed to be paid / needed to be covered! Not covered up, mind you -- but covered over / overcome / atoned for.

Throughout the Old Testament, and when sin continually prevailed upon us, the way that the people of God came to deal with their sin / our sin, was by way of sacrifice! Blood would be shed. ...It would be, in a sense, poured out over the throne of God as a means of covering the sins of the people.

And praise be to God, this is ultimately what Jesus did! That's why we don't call this table an altar, but rather a table, because Christ was sacrificed once and for all -- he was that lamb of God, unblemished -- the one who covered for us / atoned for us.

This is what we mean when we talk about love from cover to cover, it means that sin needs to be covered, and it has been covered / it has been dealt with...always through sacrifice, and ultimately through the sacrifice / the atoning work of Jesus Christ.

And Peter knew this arguably better than anyone, because just when he thought his

personal denial had the last word, Jesus came to him again, when after the resurrection Jesus asked Peter three times, "Do you love me?"

Now, after each affirmation of Peter's love, Jesus went on to express to Peter something of what that love would look like, and, in Jesus' words it would look like feeding his lambs...and tending his sheep...and feeding his sheep. In other words, love would be made visible in Peter's life in the way that he would look after the people of God!

And so it is not surprising at all to hear Peter say, "Above all, maintain constant love for one another," and why? Because, as we know, "love covers a multitude of sins."

Isn't it wonderful to know that God has given us love as a means of grace / a blessed way by which our nakedness, our guilt and our shame can be covered? In this way, love is – as the Apostle Paul described – something that we put on, much like we might put on a jacket or a sweater on a cool fall day; indeed, nothing can overcome the rags of human fallenness quite like love, which allows us, by God's grace, to put on the righteousness of Jesus!

And when we do this...things are different! Our life and our life lived together is different...and leave it to Peter to help us understand what that looks like...

Peter goes on to tell us that we shouldn't just be hospitable, but that we should be "hospitable to one another without complaining."

And that's an important distinction to make, because being hospitable is not always easy. Just ask Martha, of Mary and Martha fame. ...She'd be the first to tell us that being hospitable sometimes takes time and energy / it is not always convenient / it takes hard work.

Peter, here, is making it a point to remind us that we shouldn't grumble about the opportunities we have to be hospitable and to serve one another. ...Ah, this we should do, not just with a smile on our face, but with joy in our loving hearts!

It is not unlike what the Bible says elsewhere about giving. "Give," "yes," but don't do it "reluctantly or under compulsion, because God loves a cheerful giver."

Giving and serving are at the heart of what Peter would have us to know about what God's love looks like. He puts it like this: "Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received."

Now, how that ties into stewardship is not too difficult to surmise...because we have been called by God to be caretakers / managers / stewards...not of that which we may one day receive, but of what we have already received.

And when it comes to gifts -- spiritual gifts -- we have all received them...some teach, some preach, some have the gift of hospitality – goodness knows, we have all received the gift of being able to give.

And these gifts of ours, they are to be used as a blessing, as a means of edifying the church, and can it not be said that through our gifts every member of the church has been endowed by God for ministry?

In Anne's minute for mission this morning she spoke of the rich heritage that is ours as a church family. She talked about standing on the shoulders of those who have preceded us so that Thomas and William all the members of the next generation might be able to stand on ours.

But that will only happen when those who can teach, actually teach / when those who have the gift of encouragement, actually encourage.

So you are not called to be a preacher. So what? Maybe you are called to be a member of the choir! Perhaps delivering Meals on Wheels is the place where your gifts and the needs of the world meet or maybe yours is a call to serve in a more distant place like Haiti or Chiapas or Honduras.

Whatever our individual gift may be, know this...our calling – our responsibility as Christ’s Church – it is to ensure that all of these ministries happen...and they will, but this will only be fully realized when we, “like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of [us] has received.”

Ah, in this way, the spiritual gifts of God really are for the people of God. In the end, may our words, which are rooted in the Word of God / and our service, which is rooted in the strength of God...may it accomplish that which Peter envisions in verse 11... “That God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power for ever and ever. Amen.”

\*The following sermon has not been edited by the author; therefore, there may be discrepancies. When in doubt please refer to the audio version of the sermon on this website.