Glen Ridge Congregational Church

May 18, 2025

Scripture: Matthew 22:34 – 40

**Introductions**



Robert Indiana, “Love”, 1967

Will you pray with me?

God, May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all of our hearts, be acceptable to you, our rock, and our redeemer.

Amen.

So, this is my first sermon as your new pastor, my first meditation on scripture that I share with you. And as I was thinking about what I wanted to say to you, I was reminded about how Jesus, the one we called the Christ, began his ministry.

In each of the gospels, the collections of the stories of Jesus’ actions, and words, there is always a moment when he begins his ministry. Unfortunately, or fortunately, depending on your perspective, the different accounts don’t agree.

In John the first act of Jesus’ ministry is that he goes to a party. I love that! He goes to a wedding celebration in Cana. And the worst thing imaginable happens. They run out of wine. The party’s not over, but they’ve run dry. So, Jesus performs his first miracle. He asks the attendants to fill a number of big jugs with water. And then something happens. All that water turns into wine, and not just any wine. It turns to a really good wine, better than what they started with. And the party continues into the night.

What I love about this story is that it can upend so much of how we see Jesus. Here’s partying Jesus. Jesus who is out to have fun and celebrate. Here’s Jesus bringing the wine. Here’s Jesus making sure the night never ends. For some of us we can think of Jesus as being a bit uptight, and sanctimonious. But according to John, there is a lightness to Jesus that we don’t always see and welcome.

That’s one way Jesus inaugurates his ministry.

But if you step over to Luke, you get something completely different. In Luke, Jesus begins his ministry by going to the synagogue. And he’s given the scroll of Isaiah to read. And the passage he reads talks about restoring the sight to the blind, and freeing the captives. And when he’s done, he tells those in the synagogue that the words they just heard are fulfilled in him. And they’re awestruck.

Here's an image of Jesus proclaiming that he will minister to those forgotten and those who struggle. Those who our hearts can’t welcome, and those who aren’t experiencing the fullness of God’s dream for all of her children. This is an image of Jesus so different from the Jesus that can nowadays be experienced as the upholder of the status quo, of the one who is used to make excuses for us turning our eyes away from those in need.

Two different accounts. Two different stories of how Jesus started his ministry.

But they share something in common. They both are moments when Jesus introduces himself to his community and to the world. They are both moments when Jesus proclaims what his vision for the world is. They are both moments that tell us what everything he will do and say will follow from.

You’ve called me to be your pastor, to be your spiritual leader, your theologian in residence, the one who will help you discern where God is calling this congregation. And, I’m not Jesus. I am an imperfect man, just like everyone else. I don’t work miracles. I am not the product of a virgin birth, and my body hasn’t experienced resurrection. But I take Jesus’ example about the importance of sharing at the beginning of my ministry what my spiritual foundation is, and what everything I will try to do while I am your pastor will come from.

And it’s found in our reading this morning. Jesus tells us that the greatest commandment is to love God with everything we have, and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

My service to you is bound up in these words. In my ministry to you, and our community, and to the world, I start in love, proceed in love, and end in love. Again, I am imperfect, and my love is imperfect, But I will always be committed to love, and commit to deepening my love. And where I have not loved, I will be moved to repent, to embrace changing my ways, and my actions, and my thoughts, so that I can love more profoundly.

And I think this is what God is asking of this congregation too. From what I know so far about you as individuals, and as a church, I know that you are committed to love too: by your work in feeding the hungry, by welcoming those who have traditionally not been welcome in the church, supporting those who are sick and homebound, by trying to improve the green footprint of the congregation, by making sure that our entire community has the right to read the books we want to read. These are some of the works of love.

Our nation finds itself in a perilous time, when we are divided, and there is anger and confusion all around us. Someone told me that they see our congregation called to be a moral compass in our town, and beyond. And I think we can continue to live into this calling by following Christ’s great commandments to love God, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. On this the law and all of the prophets hang. On this we will have the north star that will point the way forward, even when things aren’t clear. Even when our lives hurt.

How do we love?

Who do we love?

How can we love more deeply and profoundly?

These are the questions of Christ’s way, and it is my prayer that in the next days, and weeks, and years ahead we will continue to respond in the ways this congregation has already found to love, and find new ways to love that might challenge us.

Amen.