

## A CHURCH FOR THE CITY: AN EQUIPPING CHURCH

Matthew 22:34-40

May 8, 2022

I wonder if you have heard of the six-word memoir? It is a project launched several years ago by SMITH magazine founder Larry Smith, and it invites ordinary people from all walks of life to distill their lives down to the six words that describe what is most important or interesting about them. The website *Six-Word Memoir* features thousands of examples. Books full of these memoirs have been published. And the memoirs now appear inside the bottle caps of Honest Tea. The very first six-word memoir was this: “Not quite what I was expecting.” This one was featured for Mother’s Day: “Wanted: A room of my own.” Many are good for a laugh. I liked this one: “Married by Elvis. Divorced by Friday.” Others are poignant. “Extremely responsible. Secretly longed for spontaneity.” Some are outright heartbreaking. “I still make coffee for two.” Some of the best in the whole collection come from teenagers, which is part of why I thought of the memoirs on this day when we celebrate our confirmands who have spent these months crafting statements of faith in their own words. “Friends are family. Don’t lose them.” “I feel stuck on a rollercoaster.”

Words are so powerful. They have the potential to move us to tears or to stir us to action. They can inspire our hope or provoke our anger. Just a few words spoken aloud can transform our lives forever. Simple phrases strung together mark the most significant moments of our lives. “This I believe.” “Congratulations. You’ve been accepted.” “I regret to inform you.” “Will you marry me?” “This just isn’t working anymore.” “It’s a girl.” “I’ve missed you.” “I’m sorry.” “I forgive you.” “The test showed there’s something wrong.” “He’s coming home.” “She’s gone home.”

Words. Words are so powerful. Here’s a revealing question for all of us to consider this week: Given the opportunity like our confirmands to craft language, how would you communicate your life’s central purpose, your deepest convictions, in just a few words? Not long ago, the *Christian Century* magazine invited leading theologians and pastors to express the essence of the Christian faith in just *seven* words—they gave the preachers an extra word. The results were moving, and some were even breathtaking. My favorite came from Nadia Bolz-Weber, a Lutheran pastor and writer. Her seven words were these: “We are who God says we are.” I tried my own, drawn predictably from the Apostle Paul and using a contraction to squeeze in just one extra word. “Nothing can separate us from God’s love.”

As a congregation, we’re exploring our call to be a church for the city. Last week, a public church. Next week, a sending church. This Sunday, we take up our call to equip. In fact, it’s been the theme of our church for this whole program year, wrapped up in seven words: *Equipping Saints for the Work of Ministry*. Way back in September, when we launched this theme, I framed it by trying out what for me, at least, was a new metaphor for the church. A charging station for all those whose spiritual batteries are depleted or in the red zone. Here, in this place, we are filled up, charged for another week. We are called here. We are equipped here. And we are sent from here.

Now, as we conclude this yearlong emphasis, I’ve been wondering about what this looks like in practice right here at Second Church. I’ve been wondering how we, Second Presbyterian Church, how we do this equipping work. We might do well to start at the

very same place, to ask ourselves in this space: What matters most? I think that's a revealing question not just for individuals but for congregations as well. When we clear away all the clutter, the glut of words, when we train our focus on the essential, what do we find? What do we discover there? In a slightly different way, it's what an attorney asks Jesus. It is a kind of legal examination. "Teacher?" he asks, perhaps with a bit of irony. "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Regardless of the asker's motive, I confess I am grateful for his question—just like a lawyer, direct, to the point. Thanks to him, thanks to this attorney, we followers of Jesus do not have to wonder what our Lord thought was most important for his disciples. He tells us. He leans on his own religious tradition. He draws words together, adapting the language of Leviticus and Deuteronomy. Six words. Love God and love one another. It's a simple summary of what matters most. It's a kind of roadmap for faithful living. Jesus says there is nothing more important than this: Love God and love one another.

At its best, the Church of Jesus Christ and any congregation that calls itself Christian is the community that gives us that map, that shapes us by the words of scripture, that charges us up and sends us out. At its best, the church is an equipping place whose witness and work move beyond the walls of the sanctuary.

Last week I spoke about the first location of Second Presbyterian Church, all the way down on Monument Circle, where a plaque now sits. One of you who was not at that original location but at the one just north of there, where the war memorial is now, remembers being in Sunday School in that building before this one was built. And she informed me that even then, Second was a church that equipped and sent, that she learned the songs and the words of scripture, she learned that God loved her and she, too, was called to love others. Right in that place. Love God and love one another. It's the message taught by this church 180 years ago and the message our confirmands have learned this year. Love God and love each other.

But you see, these words challenge us with the truth that love is never an abstract proposition. We love people. And that's not always easy. We love with action, and that requires discernment. Love does not exist in theory—love is about the practices that shape our lives. As I was writing this sermon, a minivan pulled up. It was right in front of the coffee shop where I was writing that morning, and it backed into the spot so that I could clearly read a bumper sticker that was meant for me to share with you today. The bumper sticker read, "Love People. Cook them tasty food." Thank you, Penzeys Spices for the reminder. That's the thing about love—you can touch it, you can see it, you can hear it, you can even taste it. I've tasted love in more than a few casseroles, pound cakes, and pork barbeque sandwiches over the years.

Today we receive thirty-five teenagers into active membership at Second Presbyterian Church. They come from more than a dozen different schools, spread out all over our city. Over the last nine months, they have joined together as one. They've spent those months preparing for this day. They've thought deeply about the faith and their faith. They've asked questions and explored scripture. They've prayed and worshiped together. They've served together. Together they have come to this moment. Today is a good day for our church, a day that represents both our vibrant present and our hope-filled future. Today is a good day for our church to consider our call to equip, to ask: Do the words we speak in here and the actions we take out there offer a compelling witness for these students? It's a good day to ask ourselves: Which kernel of truth will be sturdy enough to hold firm for them when the inevitable storms of life will come? It's a good day for the church to ask: Which vision of faith will capture their hearts and inspire them not to stop but to continue growing, serving, and leading the church?

As a church *for* the city, we have a God-given call to ask these questions and to do so with open hearts and minds. As a church for the city, we have a God-given responsibility to share the life-giving message of *hope* we find in the gospel. These confirmands

remind me that it is time that churches like ours demonstrate to the world that there are deeper pools of spiritual commitment than the shallow pools of small-minded pronouncements that occupy far too much of the religious landscape in our time. Those deeper wells—we owe them to this city. We owe it to those among us and those around us who long for something more, who are not satisfied by superficial spirituality, by smug self-righteousness, by callous condemnation, by disconnected deism, or mindless moralism. We owe it to them, and we owe it to the one who calls us to a faith of profound simplicity. Love God and love one another.

This *book* we call Deuteronomy is not really a book. It's a *speech*. It's a thirty-four-chapter speech given by Moses, given to God's people as they are preparing to enter the land of promise. Moses knows that he will not go with them into that land, and so it's a lot like the talk that you parents might give to a child just before she heads out for the first day of high school. And as is often the case in those situations, the audience is not terribly attentive. Who can blame them? They are on the verge of freedom, ending forty years of wilderness wandering—or three years of middle school monotony—literally overlooking the land of promise flowing with milk and honey and amber waves of grain. They are distracted by the possibilities before them. They are eager to rush in. And that's why their leader Moses stops them. Pausing on the precipice of newness, he speaks of what lies before them and what has carried them this far.

Thirty-four chapters. It is a long speech. It includes detailed instructions on subjects such as the kosher diet, the penalties for covenant violations, and what is and what is not an acceptable offering. Indeed, as you read the Book of Deuteronomy, it is easy to get lost in a sea of words, and I can imagine some in the original audience dozing off. I can imagine others wondering when they'll be finally released for lunch. I'm sure none of you can relate to that! In any case, the crowd grows weary over time, and Moses is in need of a soundbite. He needs some

simple, memorable words that get straight to the heart, some words that will be easy for them to learn, repeat, and pass on. So, Moses introduces those words, *Shema*, we call it in Hebrew. The word means, “hear” or “listen”, which is the first word of this commandment. It is a command, not a suggestion. “*Listen up!*” Moses said. Here is the whole thing in a nutshell; here's the CliffsNotes version of your faith: “God alone is Lord. Love God with everything you've got.” End of story. And here is what you should do with these words: Cling to them, begin and end every day with them, carry them with you wherever you go, display them in your home, repeat them to your children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren. No matter where you are, keep those words close at hand because if you forget this basic message, you've lost your whole purpose. You might as well give up. If we fail to repeat them, we've lost our future.

I believe that, like our ancestors in faith, we stand at the edge of something brand new, right here at Second Church. As we venture together into a new chapter of ministry with all of its possibilities and promise, the freedom of new beginnings, we do well to cling to the heart of faith that sustained our ancestors, that calls to us still. *Listen up!* Here's what matters most. Love God with everything you've got. Love the people God has placed in front of you. Repeat the simple words. At some point this week, you're going to need those words. At some point this week you're going to remember, need to remember, that call. At some point this week, somebody you meet is going to be desperate to hear them. So, Moses says, keep them close. Pass them on. Most of all, *live* by them. Our faith matters only when it transforms our actions and reorders our priorities. Our faith matters when we are different because we are shaped by sacred words.

Listen up. You can quote scripture until you are blue in the face. You can shout out every other voice with your pious proclamations of self-proclaimed purity. You can boast and you can brag about how much faith you have. The fact remains that the only

proof of our love for God is the life you live. The only evidence of our faith is the community that we choose to create, the hospitality we dare to extend, the message we are bold to share. The only evidence, the only testament to our faith, is how well we have loved God and each other. Our neighborhood, our city, our state, our nation, and our world are in urgent need of those who have been equipped and charged up for acts of courageous love, for words of compelling witness.

So, here's my advice. Don't make it too complicated. Start right here—the answer Jesus gives when asked what matters most. It's a six-word charge for the equipping church.

*Let us be defined by love. Amen.*