

**Un-Sermon for July 6, 2008**  
**First Congregational United Church of Christ**  
**Asheville, NC**

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**Text: Passages about the greatest commandment and the one like it (Matt. 22:34-40; Mark 12:28-34; Luke 10:25-28) in *The Message* translation.**

**Title: "What Did He Say?"**

**Topic: The Basics of Spirituality**

**Theme: That to love God whole-heartedly and to love our neighbors as ourselves is what matters most of all.**

**Bulletin cover: Q: What was Jesus talking about when He said: "Do this and you will live"?**

I. Introduction: "Where is God?" Joke, plus Why an Un-Sermon

A couple had two little boys who were always getting into trouble. Their parents knew that if any mischief occurred in their village, their sons were probably involved.

The boys' mother heard that an elder in town had been successful in disciplining children, so she asked if he would speak with her sons. The elder agreed, but asked to see them separately.

So, the mother sent her youngest son first, in the morning. The elder, a huge man with a booming voice, sat the boy down and asked him sternly, "Where is God?" The boy's mouth dropped open, but he made no response.

So the elder repeated the question in an even sterner tone, "Where is God!!?" Again the wide-eyed boy made no attempt to answer.

The elder raised his voice and bellowed, "WHERE IS GOD!?" The boy screamed and bolted from the room, ran directly home and dove into a closet, slamming the door behind him.

When his older brother found him hiding, he asked, "What happened?"

The younger brother, gasping for breath, replied, "We're in BIG trouble this time. God is missing, and they think WE did it!"...

I agree with the Canadian novelist, Robertson Davies, who wrote that "The love of truth lies at the root of much humour." A truth behind that little joke is that it's usually not children who hide or lose God...

But I tell that joke mainly to loosen you up a bit this morning, trying to fulfill one of the wishes for our worship that was expressed in the lively worship conversation I participated in on Monday evening. We can loosen up.

When our family lived in DC, there was a pastor who did frequent radio ads for his Baptist congregation, and he always ended with the tag-line: "Not a sermon, just a thought." My own thoughts seldom matched his in those ads, but I like the not-a-sermon approach. For three reasons: (First) It's safer. In what seems like a year-long "last preacher standing" contest, not a sermon, but an un-sermon. (Second) An un-sermon

also seems preferable as a means of keeping things simple and light, so as to provide relief from the complicated, heavy and emotional decisions we've faced as a congregation in the past few months and years. (Third) I also have a biblical rationale for doing an un-sermon. I realized not long ago that while we refer to three chapters of Matthew's gospel as "the sermon on the mount", in reality it's a collection of sayings, not a sermon.

That's why I'll share an un-sermon this morning -- although the next part will sound enough like a sermon so that I don't leave your expectations totally unfulfilled.

## II. What He Said

A questioner wanted to know from Jesus, who seemed to have an inside understanding of such things: What is most important if we would live as persons in accordance with the will and spirit of God?

The answer seems so simple: love God whole-heartedly and love your neighbor as yourself. In a way, the response says all we need to know about living a righteous life and all there is to knowing eternal life. All other points of theology or scriptural interpretation or religious practice bow to those spiritual ABCs.

*How* we observe the Sabbath, although it was of great concern to some of Jesus' critics, doesn't really matter. No, He said, loving our neighbors, being neighbors to people in need – these take precedence over religious law.

Nor does which religion guides our lives have primary importance. The Samaritan we've heard so much about – He belonged to what observant Jews considered a heretical, treasonous cult whose members had sold their birthright for a mess of pottage. Theirs was an absolutely inadequate religion, said most Jews. Yet that Samaritan's love of God led him to help a Jew on the side of the road when law-abiding Jews passed by on the other side.

Anything that distracts from living in accordance with those two basics will damage our spirits, imperil our souls, prevent us from living as fully as we can, deprive us of tasting eternal life here on Earth

We are to love God whole-heartedly, above any and all idols, whether the idolatry involves nation, religion, denomination, family, wealth, success, fame, pleasure, science, technology, entertainment etc... Those values fall lower on the priority list than loving the Divine One who formed us and loves us. If any other value takes precedence over God in our lives, then we have strayed from the spiritual path.

Likewise with the instruction to love our neighbors. The spiritual life has no room for hating or ignoring or excluding our neighbors, particularly those in need of assistance. If you desire to lose the eternal in your life, it's very easy. It is spiritual death to despise or denigrate those of other religions, other races, other cultures, the opposite sex or other sexual orientation. We cannot withhold our compassion from anyone.

Love God. Love neighbor. Do this and you shall live. That's it. So much for what might have sounded sermon-like. Are those some silent "amens" I hear from you?

### III. What He Never Said

“The love of truth lies at the root of much humour.” I say that again because I hope you will keep it in mind as I move to some definite un-sermon-like material.

Many of you, I know, have spent a lot of time reading and studying and teaching the Bible. Have you noticed, as I have, that Bible scholars conduct a great deal of research, discussion and technical argument trying to differentiate between those things Jesus said and those things the gospel writers might have included as *if* he said them. Does that discussion get as confusing for you as it sometimes does for me?

For the past couple of years, I have focused my investigations in another direction, one that I think causes almost no confusion at all. I’m talking about the things Jesus verily *did not* say. I call them Jesus’ un-quotes.

Following biblical precedent, I have three examples from the earliest un-quotes I uncovered in my research:

Number 1. Jesus didn’t say: “Mom, I can’t see the harm in having bacon for breakfast like the Gentiles do.” [Since the family were observant Jews who were forbidden to eat pork, it’s pretty safe to say He never said that, right?]

Number 2. “The only Good Samaritan is a dead Samaritan.” [That was not how the story was told, but the general notion seems to have caught on with a lot of people.]

Third example. “Blessed are you if you do not laugh on the Sabbath.” [I checked all through the gospels – no sign of that one, either, although I might have missed something back in Deuteronomy.]

As my research led me to more of Jesus’ un-quotes, I discovered another way of approaching them. Consider it a perverted Bible quiz, or perhaps a Bible un-quiz sounds better. Suppose I cite an un-quote and you tell me when He didn’t say it? Got that: I’ll say the un-quote and you tell me when He didn’t say it. Let’s try it. Speak right up if you think you know the answer, because we’re entering a strange valley here and we’ll need to cooperate in order to get through it. Again following biblical precedent, I brought 7 of this type of un-quote.

Number 1. “C’mon, Peter, the walk will do you good.” [Peter trying to walk on water. This story is more about trusting Jesus in times of stress than about literally walking on water, to be sure. Either way, I’m positive this is an un-quote rather than a quote.]

2. “Leprosy is a sign of God’s judgment.” [On the occasion of healing the 10 lepers. He had ample opportunity to say this, to blame, as we sometimes do, those who suffered, but He never said anything like it.]

3. “I was ordained by the ultimate religious authority. You religious bureaucrats want nothing to do with me.” [When asked by whose authority He did and taught as He did, He did not need to provide credentials beyond what He did and said, but He didn’t say this, either.]

4. “Excuse me, I just came into the city. Can you please direct me to the Christian Science Reading Room?” [Entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, but He didn’t say it, not even about the Jewish Science Reading Room.]

5. “The Truth! You can’t handle the Truth.” [Conversation with Pilate – He didn’t say it, although I would love to put it there if I were writing a gospel for the 21<sup>st</sup> century!]

6. "I'm b-a-a-ck!" [After the Resurrection when disciples were in hiding in a locked room. His sequels keep coming, but there's no record that He ever said this.]
7. "Beam me up, Scotty." [When He ascended into heaven after spending more time with His disciples. He didn't require artificial means to reach divine space and time.]

You did very well with that! Sometimes, as you might have noticed, in addition to their potential for humor, the Jesus un-quotes convey utterly serious impact. Would you like 7 or 12 of them? [Sorry 7s, you're out of luck this time. Not even half your vote gets counted.]

1. "My birthday? June 11<sup>th</sup>. Why?" [We really don't know when His birth occurred. In those days, they had a different calendar system. The important thing is that He came into the world, not when. You've probably seen the bumpersticker that boasts of still celebrating Christmas – I hope that means celebrating His presence among us, not just the holiday on the calendar.]

2. "Oh yeah, well my Dad can beat your Dad in anything!" [Imagining Him as a child is sheer speculation, I know, and maybe not real serious. Or is it?... God is on our side? My God can beat your God?]

3. "No girls allowed." [Despite the appearance of sexism in the gospel lists of apostles and the old boys club in many churches and denominations, Jesus never said this. I agree with Carl Sandburg -- and I think Jesus would, too -- that "exclusive" is an ugly word and has no place in the vocabulary of a truly spiritual or truly educated person.]

4. "I'm a *salvation* army of one." [So much about this one makes it an un-quote. He wasn't so much interested in what many Christians call salvation. Healing and transformation in line with loving God and neighbor were His focus. And He gathered people around Him to help with His mission, people like us, of course.]

5. "Do you know what will give you guys 12 strong bodies? Some of my Wonder-bread." [Some of you aren't old enough, perhaps, to remember those bread ads. The un-quote might mask the truth that an appreciation for life's wonder and for the bread of life that is communion truly does make for strong bodies, church bodies in particular. I have not found any record that He said this, however.]

6. "We never did it that way before." [It's frequently quoted as if this appeared among the Beatitudes, but He never said this -- which might have been one reason He had so many problems with religious leaders.]

7. "TGIF!!!" [This is an interesting un-quote, I think. Was He relieved to get to what we call Good Friday? We might know some day. He didn't say it, though.]

8. "Well, think about it. Barabbas is a rebel against Roman oppression. I'm a wandering spiritual teacher. Who would you want kept alive?" [We know He didn't say it, but the question seems to loom constantly before humanity: will we follow Jesus or those who promise freedom from tyranny by violent means.]

9. "I feel your pain." [It sounds familiar, but He didn't say it. In spite of the truth that His sharing in humanity's pain helps many people believe in God, He didn't say it – perhaps additional evidence that actions speak louder than words.]

10. "I did it my way." [When I tell people about my research, many of them share their own finding that this seems like one of Jesus' un-quotes. Yes, He could have said it, but He didn't. Besides, we need to ask the more important question: Do we do it His way?]

11. "Take it from me, death isn't what it's cracked up to be." [Usually this sort of "cracked up" comment points to negative aspects of something we typically think of as beneficial. In this case His un-quote goes the other way – a negative perhaps not so negative. Even with His un-quotes, he often shows our customary ideas under a different Light – death might not be all so final or negative as we imagine.]

12. "That's one small step for a man, one giant leap for humanity." [When He stepped out of the tomb and demonstrated the truth that love is stronger than death, He could have said this, but none of the Bible gospels or even the extra-biblical gospels say He did.]

I'll remind you that this is an un-sermon. You can forget everything Jesus didn't say, if you like. The un-quotes don't matter very much as long as you remember: "Love God, Love your neighbor. Do *this* and you will live."

Amen

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Benediction:

Friends,

Jesus often said "Fear not." And, upon entering the houses of friends, He often said "Peace be unto this house." Remember.

Now He might be saying: "Can you hear me now?" And, "Why don't you come on up and see me sometime."

Amen