

February 12, 2023: A Pastoral Message by Pastor Margaret Keyser

~ Sixth Sunday of Advent ~

*“When God speaks about love and life”*

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## **Scripture Reading: Deuteronomy 30 v 15-20**

### **I. Introduction:**

Valentine’s Day can indeed be a lovely day, when we give or receive love, and enjoy the gift of flowers and chocolates and maybe a special outing. Some would say, but Valentine’s Day should be every day, or showing love and joy should happen more often than just on that one day. One good thing about Valentine’s Day for those who look forward to it, is its potential to be an indicator of showing love and special care to those around us. It is certainly not perfect, and there are other days such as birthdays to do that. Either way, to have a day or time to show someone some love and special care is beautiful, like a Covenant Day maybe.

One important aspect about a covenant, is that what is agreed between or among people, or parties, is expected to work for all of them, that is, how they will be and act with one other. It is intended to be formal and written down to give it some power and make it binding. As a church we have a covenant written down in our bylaws, and it is intended for church members to follow those basic tenets of what had been agreed by the congregation. One specific covenant many churches agree to, is a behavioral covenant, which is a document that states how members of a congregation will treat one another, and how specific aspects of the work of the congregation will be handled. This is especially relevant for congregations that came out of a conflict situation and want to make sure they do things differently. In other settings we may talk about written agreements, like a legal contract between parties, and in mediation we use the word agreement, which parties would agree to. One would hope that people or parties would keep an agreement or contract or even a covenant, but we know that such agreements and contracts and covenants can be broken.

The point of this is, that when human beings come together to be together, work together, serve together, and make decisions together, there is the hope that things will work out, but they don't always do. What is then necessary is something to regulate our behaviors to improve situations.

## **II. The choice to live or die.**

The Covenant between Yahweh and the people of Israel at its core can be summarized in the Commandment of loving God and neighbor as oneself. We see in Matthew 22 v 37 – 40 the following words from Jesus, ***“37 Jesus said to him, “You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind.” 38 This is the first and great commandment. 39 And the second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ 40 On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”***

Jesus took this first quote from the Book of Deuteronomy 6 v 5, and the second part of it from Leviticus, but it is implicit in the Book of Deuteronomy in its description of neighborly love in Deuteronomy 10 v 19. The whole book of Deuteronomy is believed to be a sermon by Moses to Israel in Moab, just before the people crossed over the Jordan River to take possession of the promised land. Moses reminds them of the gracious and loving acts of Yahweh as they were traveling through the wilderness then, and as they may be faced with other temptations in the land of Canaan now. The ten commandments given to the people of Israel earlier on was the beginning of God letting them know that there are two areas in their lives that are important, love for God and how they should treat their parents, their partners and humanity. Deuteronomy is a reminder to them to hold on to God, not to fall prey to other idols, but to be steadfast in their faith, and the covenant. In Chapter 28 we see the results of what obedience to God would mean, that they would be blessed and be set high among the nations, but if they don't, they would have severe curses come upon them. And even if they have gone astray away from the Lord, and gone through many curses, God will then still have mercy upon them and they will be restored, as we read in Chapter 30 v 1 ff. God is a merciful God, who wants to be part of their lives and their struggles and wants to guide them and bless them with the gifts of God's heart. They have a choice as written in verses 15-17, to love God and to walk in God's ways, and to experience

the blessings from God as they are entering the land they will possess. But, if their hearts turn away and they are not obedient, and bow down to other gods and worship them, then God will destroy them. These are harsh words indeed from Yahweh to the people of Yahweh.

### **III. Conclusion:**

So, when Christ quotes Deuteronomy and appeals to His disciples and the church to love God and neighbor, He takes us back to the journey of the Israelites with Moses, and He reminds us that we have a choice to love God and neighbor, an important commandment for all followers of Christ. But knowing how fallible human beings are, He also reassures us that when we stray from this commandment there is forgiveness through Him and that we can always come back on the path of righteousness, the path of love that fills our hearts and minds and gives us the strength to make this world a better place. Nothing that feels to us as irredeemable, is a condemnation from Christ. His heart is open and waiting to cleanse us. There is a deep divine love that wants to embrace us and bring us close to God's mercy, and then there are the opportunities for us to be instruments of love and gentleness and humility to others. God wants to mold us, shape us into loving and caring and humble human beings, listening to one another, respecting one another, forgiving one another, and to do good to one another. God wants us to come together in worship, hearing God's word as a congregation, like the early church and then to go and serve in our various capacities. All of this is happening within the realm of the covenant of love for God and neighbor. If all of humanity could see how simple this really is, and that this love is not from us, but from God given to us, how different things would have been then and now. If all of humanity could put aside our pride and urge to be better than the other, and to feel God's love deeply and live from that place of divine love within us, how different would life be?

So, while we are thinking of Valentine's Day as that one day in the year where we wish each other happy Valentine's Day, and giving gifts and flowers, may all our hearts be open for that Divine love and renew our covenant of love with God through Christ, and may God continue to embrace us and forgive and heal us to love and be loved every day. Amen