

22 after Pentecost, October 25, 2026

Matthew 22:34-46

Rev. Heather Carlson, St. John's Presbyterian Church, Medicine Hat, AB

When a Presbyterian Church is searching for a new minister, one of the first steps is to prepare a congregational profile. What are the strengths and hopes of the congregation. What are the history and challenges. What leadership is needed in this season. That's how two years ago, I was introduced to the mission, purpose and commitment statements of St. John's. Half page available at coffee for further inquiry. I'll just read one:

"The Mission of St. John's Presbyterian Church is to Glorify God by living the love of Jesus Christ. Loving one another and submitting to one another for the sake of Christ. This is true beauty and true glory."

I hope you can hear the echoes of our gospel passage.

You might also have heard it talk about submission... a tricky term knowing the damaging application it has taken in many times of the church. I shared about that when I preached for the call here in January 2025, hopefully redeeming some of the beauty intended of mutual submission to Christ. I know God used these statements in the call process to draw us to one another.

Now, as we've gotten to know each other, folks have sometimes blushed, admitting quietly, we had been thinking it was time to update it until you preached on it! Or, I didn't even know we had a mission statement! Others, when reading the half page statements, resonated more with the purpose or commitment statements.

The work was done around the turn of the century and like any document, function only as long as it is kept alive in the community. Or, it is kept alive only as long as it functions to define and invigorate the identity and imagination of the people.

There is some great stuff in there. And there is something to be said for brevity. Sometimes, when we try to say everything that matters, we make it difficult to remember anything at all.

A concise statement doesn't negate all the good work that came before it. Rather, it gives us a way of holding that work together. It offers a kind of clarity—a lens through which we can look at ourselves and ask, *Is this who we are? Is this what we are called to do?*

We see something similar in the creeds of the church. The Apostles' Creed and the Nicene Creed don't tell us everything there is to know about the Christian faith. They aren't intended to be exhaustive explanations of everything we believe. But they draw together central truths of our faith and give us a way of remembering, articulating, and living into those truths.

And in our Gospel reading today, Jesus offers something like that kind of lens.

When asked which commandment is the greatest, Jesus doesn't discard the law or the prophets. He doesn't suggest that everything that came before him is suddenly irrelevant. Instead, he identifies the heart of the matter.

"'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'"

Love God. Love your neighbour.

These two commandments don't replace the whole story of God's relationship with God's people. They help us understand that story. They give us a way to recognize what matters most. Changed the way I read OT.

And so, building on the work that was done here nearly thirty years ago, with a little help from technology, the Session has been reflecting on a statement that might help us articulate what we believe God is calling us to be and do as a congregation today.

As followers of Jesus, together we worship deeply, equip disciples, lead humbly, and serve with grace and hope.

Over the next month, we're going to spend some time with these short phrases, considering what they mean for us as a congregation. What they might mean for the way we live together, make decisions, use our resources, and participate in God's mission in the world. Share your feedback with myself and other Session members.

Today, we begin with the phrase that connects so naturally with our Gospel reading: **worship deeply.**

Jesus tells us that the first and greatest commandment is to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind. Before he tells us what to do for our neighbours, before he speaks about our responsibilities to one another, he speaks about our relationship with God.

Love God. Not casually. Not occasionally. Not only when it is convenient. Love God with all that you are. This is at the heart of worship.

Worship is our response to God. We praise God for who God is. We give thanks for what God has done. We listen for what God is saying to us. And we offer our lives in response to God's love.

Worship begins with God, not with us. That distinction matters, because it is easy to confuse worship with our experience of a worship service.

We can leave church thinking about whether we liked the music, whether we enjoyed the sermon, whether the prayers spoke to us, whether the service moved along at a good pace, or whether the minister's shoes were appropriate for the occasion!

And some of those things aren't necessarily unimportant. Music can lift our hearts. A sermon can challenge us or comfort us. A beautiful sanctuary can help us recognize something of God's glory. The familiar rhythms of worship can give us a sense of belonging and peace.

But none of those things, by themselves, is the heart of worship. The question is not simply, *Did I like the service?* The question is, *What helped turn my attention toward God?* What reminded me of God's presence? What opened me to God's grace? What did I hear that challenged me to live differently? Where was I invited to respond to God's love?

Sometimes worship will be beautiful and moving. Sometimes it will feel ordinary. We come because God is God. We come to remember who God is and whose we are.

The statement says that we want to worship *deeply*? The word *deeply* suggests something profound, wholehearted, and more than superficial. It describes something that reaches beneath the surface and affects us in meaningful ways.

And that takes us right back to Jesus' words: "Love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Jesus isn't asking for a small corner of our lives. He is describing a love that involves our whole selves.

Our hearts: the centre of our love, our desires, our commitments, and what we treasure.

Our souls: the deepest part of who we are, our very lives, our identity as people who belong to God.

Our minds: our thoughts, our understanding, our questions, and the way we make sense of the world around us.

In other words, loving God is not simply an emotion. It is not just an intellectual agreement with a set of beliefs. And it is not merely following a list of religious practices. It involves our feelings, our thinking, our choices, our relationships, and our lives.

To worship deeply is to bring our whole selves into our relationship with God.

Worship takes many forms. We worship when we gather as a congregation to sing, pray, hear Scripture, and celebrate the sacraments. We worship in personal prayer, in studying Scripture, in giving thanks, and in seeking God's guidance. We worship when we pause to notice the beauty of creation or remember God's faithfulness in the midst of uncertainty.

What connects these experiences is that worship draws our attention toward God and helps us respond to God's presence, love, and grace.

Worship, then, is not simply an activity we fit into our schedules. It is cultivating a relationship with God that becomes an important part of who we are and how we live. And that relationship shapes us. The gratitude we express in prayer can change how we receive the gifts of life. The grace we encounter in Scripture can shape the grace we extend to others. The truths we sing and proclaim together can challenge us to reconsider our priorities and the way we use our time, abilities, and resources.

Jesus' words remind us that this is a wholehearted commitment. He doesn't say to love God with some of our heart, most of our soul, or the parts of our minds we have figured out. He says *all* our heart, *all* our soul, and *all* our mind.

This is a lifelong invitation. We won't always get it right. Our attention will wander. We will sometimes put other things first. There will be seasons when God feels close and seasons when faith feels more difficult. But worship invites us to keep turning toward God, again and again, trusting that God's grace meets us wherever we are.

Saying that we are people who aim to worship deeply is to have worship imprinted on the DNA of who we are.

Of course, that kind of depth doesn't happen by accident. We live in a world that constantly competes for our attention. There is always something else to do, something else to worry about, something else to buy, something else to accomplish, or some new thing to scroll. Our attention can be pulled in a hundred different directions. And the things that demand the most attention are not always the things that deserve the most attention.

That is one reason worship matters. It gives us the opportunity to stop, to listen, to remember, and to reorient ourselves. It reminds us that we are not the centre of the universe. We are not responsible for holding everything together. We are not defined solely by our productivity, our possessions, our achievements, or the opinions other people hold about us.

We belong to God. And we need to be reminded of that—not just once, but regularly. We need practices that help us turn toward God: gathering for worship, reading Scripture, praying, singing, sharing in the life of the community, and taking time to notice God's presence in the ordinary moments of our days.

These practices don't earn God's love. God's love is already given to us in grace. Rather, these practices help us attend to that love, receive it, and respond to it. To worship deeply is to be intentional about making room for God in our lives. It means asking ourselves what is shaping our hearts, occupying our minds, and directing our choices.

We all give our attention, our energy, and our devotion to something. We can give ourselves to success, to financial security, to our careers, to our families, to our reputation, to the things we own, or to the things we hope to accomplish. Even good things can become the things around which we organize our lives. Family is a gift. Work can be meaningful. Financial resources can be used for good. A church building can be a place of welcome, community, and encounter with God.

But none of these things is God. To worship deeply is to remember the difference between the gifts we receive and the One who gives them. It is to resist the temptation to make our own comfort, our own preferences, our own entertainment, or our own success the ultimate measure of what matters.

And when God is at the centre, we begin to ask different questions. Instead of asking only, "What do we want our church to be?" we can ask, "What is God calling us to be?" Instead of asking only, "What will preserve what we have?" we can ask, "How can what we have been given serve God's purposes?" Instead of asking only, "What do we enjoy?" we can ask, "How is God inviting us to grow?"

These are not always easy questions. They require patience, prayer, humility, and a willingness to listen. They may lead us to change. They may challenge some of our assumptions. But they begin with worship—with the recognition that our life together is ultimately about God, not us.

There is one more thing worth noticing in Jesus' answer in our gospel text this morning. Jesus says that loving God is the greatest commandment. But he doesn't stop there. He immediately adds, "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." The two commandments belong together. We cannot separate our love for God from our love for the people God loves.

And while we'll spend more time in the coming weeks exploring what it means to equip disciples, lead humbly, and serve with grace and hope, we should recognize that these things grow out of worship. When we worship deeply, we are reminded that every person we encounter is someone God loves. When we worship deeply, we are challenged to look beyond ourselves and our own concerns. When we worship deeply, we begin to see our time, our abilities, our resources, and our congregation not simply as things that belong to us, but as gifts entrusted to us for God's purposes.

Worship is not an escape from the world. It is a way of learning to see the world through God's eyes.

We gather to praise God, and we are sent to love our neighbours. We receive grace, and we learn to extend grace. We give thanks for God's generosity, and we are invited to become generous ourselves. Our worship shapes our lives, and our lives become a response to God's love.

Jesus says, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." That is more than a Sunday morning commitment. It is an invitation to a whole life turned toward God. May we be a people who worship deeply.