

“All You Need is Love”

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**Matthew 22:34-40**

**34** When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, **35** and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. **36** “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” **37** He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ **38** This is the greatest and first commandment. **39** And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ **40** On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

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A young comic walks into the backstage area of a comedy club where some of the old time comics are sitting around telling jokes. One of them says “Seventeen” and the other old timers all roar with laughter. A little later, another one of them says “Thirty-Two” and again, they all laugh hysterically.

The young comic can't figure out what's going on, so he asks one of the locals next to him “What're these old-timers doing?” The local says “Well, they've been hanging around together so long they all know all the same jokes, so to save time they've given all the jokes numbers.”

The young comic says, “That's clever! I think I'll try that.” So he stands up and says in a loud voice “Nineteen!”

And there is silence.

Everybody just looks at him, and nobody laughs. Embarrassed, he sits down again, and asks the local “What happened? Why didn't anyone laugh?” The local says “Well, son, you just didn't tell it right...”

If I yelled out “John 3:16” at a church potluck, most would know what I was talking about. The same with “Psalm 23” and “Genesis 1:1.” There are many other passages that you might know, but perhaps the scripture reference doesn’t ring a bell. You might not know Matthew 28:19 by reference, but if I started out with “Therefore go and make...” many of you would join in with “disciples of all nations” and still others might join in by the time I got to “baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.” If I said “Proverbs 3:6,” you might not know it, but if I said “in all your ways acknowledge him...” many of you would join in with “...and he will make your paths straight.”

Though our common base of scriptural knowledge is decreasing, it’s still there. This was likely even more the case in Jesus’ day. With most of the people not being able to read or write, memorization of scripture was very common. They did not have the numbering system that we have, so they wouldn’t have called out “Psalm 23,” but they might say “The Lord is my shepherd...” and everyone would know what they were talking about.

In today’s Gospel passage, the Pharisees and the Sadducees got together – and this was an odd pairing, indeed. These were not usually on the same side, but they were all not happy with this Jesus guy, so they teamed up. In last week’s passage, the Pharisees wanted to entrap Jesus with their question about paying taxes to the emperor. In this week’s passage, the two groups send a lawyer to ask Jesus a question, and Matthew narrates this is “to test him.”

The question is “which commandment in the law is the greatest?” At this point, the 10 Commandments of God had become 613 commandments. If Jesus picked only one of the 613, He left Himself open for a barrage of criticism from those who favored another commandment. There are multiple occasions when the religious leaders oppose Jesus. They mock Him, dispute Him, and conspire against Him. Certainly they will pounce on whatever answer He offers. Yet, this time, the trap they spring does not capture Jesus.

Jesus answers with one of the most well-known passages to Jews. He says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” And this is one of those cases when there is more than meets the eye. When Jesus said this, he was quoting from what we now call Deuteronomy 6:5. All of those listening would be *very* familiar with this passage, and the one right before it, which says, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” They would know the part which follows, “Keep these words that I am commanding you

today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.” They knew these words because they *did* keep them in their hearts, and they recited them when rising and when lying down, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is known in Hebrew as the *Shema*, which is the first word: “hear,” or more accurately it is “to continuously be listening to,” or *hearing*. It is a way of life and observant Jews to this day recite the Shema. It is an important lesson to keep in one’s mind at all times. For us, we might change it slightly: “Hear, O *Christ-follower*, the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” Not a bad verse to quote daily, is it?

Jesus passes the test, as He responded with this passage. The greatest commandment is to love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. Well, that sounds easy enough, right? Hmmm, we just have to love God with *all* of our heart, soul, and mind. Just with everything we are and everything we have. Just with our entire being. And then Jesus goes and throws in that we should also love our neighbor as our self. Whoa, even more love. How do we love our neighbor as ourselves if we love God with *all* of ourselves? What’s left over for our neighbors if everything is going to God? And that’s not even getting into the love for self, as Mindy and JIP shared in our children’s message today.

This love stuff is a little tougher than we thought. In the 2001 movie *Moulin Rouge*, the lead male character is trying to convince the lead female character to give him a chance at love. He begins quoting from various love songs: “Love is like oxygen, love is a many splendored thing, love lifts us up where we belong, all you need is love! Love lifts us up where we belong... where eagles fly, on a mountain high.” Yes, we have many songs about love. Turn the radio on and scan through the stations and you will hear love song after love song. But with all of these songs, do we *really* know what love is about? In the words of another song, “I wanna know what love is.” And, I wanna know how I can love God with all of my heart, soul, and mind and still love my neighbor, too.

Perhaps Jesus was showing us that love of neighbor and love of God are intertwined. We cannot truly love God if we do not love our neighbor. As Dorothy Day put it “I really only love God as much as I love the person I love the least.” Perhaps her wording could be tweaked just a bit to make it sink in even more. Instead of saying “the person I love the least,” what if we changed that to “the person I hate the most.” That is essentially the same thing, isn’t it? The person who we love the least is the person that we hate the most. Now, let’s try her saying again with that substitution: “I really only love God as much as I love the person I hate the most.” Hate for others is a common tendency for humans. We humans tend to distrust or even hate those who are different from us. In today’s culture, we may struggle with hating those whose political leanings are different from ours. We humans may even suggest that God is on our side when we hate others. But if we remember that we only love God as much as we love the person we hate the most, perhaps we will learn to hate less and love more. One of the ways that we love God is through loving those that God created. Not just the most lovable people, but perhaps even more importantly, the most un-lovable people. 1 John says “Those who say, ‘I love God,’ and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” To love our neighbor means that we see the image of God in them – as we are all created in the image of God. To love our neighbor means that we love God in them.

Perhaps we find it easy to love those who love us first, but Jesus says to love our neighbors. We can look elsewhere in scripture to see who Jesus says is our neighbor. I believe we’ll find that includes pretty much everyone else. It includes the one who loves us back, certainly. But it also includes the one who will return our love with hate or indifference. It includes the ones who chose to continue actions that endanger others in a time of pandemic. It includes the ones being killed in acts of genocide around the world – and it includes the ones *committing* the acts of genocide. It includes the one who is so different from us that we squint to see the image of God in him. In this election season, it even includes politicians putting out smearing ads full of falsehoods. And it certainly includes neighbors who will be harmed by policies of politicians, so love of neighbor extends to the voting booth when we vote against policies that harm our neighbor.

We cannot love others on our own. This is not something that comes from within us. It is something that comes from *God* within us. Rev. Ralph Hill said “We cannot love God in our own power. We cannot love others in our own power. What we can do is allow ourselves to become channels for the power of God's love to flow through us to others.”

In his book, *The Magnificent Defeat*, Frederick Buechner, the Presbyterian minister and author, writes of love:

“The love for equals is a human thing—of friend for friend...It is to love what is loving and lovely. The world smiles. The love for the less fortunate is a beautiful thing—the love for those who suffer, for those who are poor, the sick, the failures, the unlovely. This is compassion, and it touches the heart of the world. The love for the more fortunate is a rare thing—to love those who succeed where we fail, to rejoice without envy with those who rejoice.... And then there is the love for the enemy—love for the one who does not love you but mocks, threatens, and inflicts pain....This is God's love. It conquers the world.”

Love for neighbor is part of Jesus' command for us. It is likened to our love for God. And love is not just a feeling. It is an action. This love conquers the world.

May we be instruments of God's love and peace in a world of violence and hate. “All you need is love.” Yes, it's actually true. But love is a mighty big word, full of action. May God show us the love that we should have for all of our neighbors and may we, in thought and deed, reflect that love back to our God, who is love itself. Amen