

Sermon

October 25, 2020

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Matthew 22:34-40

As many of us know, loving someone can be hard. But it can also be the easiest thing in the world. In fact, love comes so easy to us that it's one of the very first things we do. On the list of things we do when we first arrive on this Earth, loving someone is like number *three*, after crying and pooping. We love our parents—we love whoever it is that's taking care of us in those early days and weeks—and we love them and *trust* them with all that we are, even without knowing a single thing about them. We don't know the kind of *person* they are, we don't know what they've *done* in their lives, we don't know how they feel about *us*... but in those earliest weeks of our lives, we reach out with blind love to *whoever* will reach back. Love like that is instinctual; elemental.

And sometimes the world grinds that out of us. Maybe our parents didn't stick around, or live to earn that love we gave so freely. Maybe many of those we grow to love through our lives let us down... or maybe there was one who hurt us. *Broke* us, and our love. Maybe the loss of the ones we love makes us wonder if it would have been better to have never loved at all... and there comes a time when that love no longer comes as easily.

And then *maybe*, over time, we *discover* what we have been denying ourselves, and we learn to love *again*—we *allow* ourselves to love again—and it opens our worlds in ways we couldn't have imagined or expected.

Love is our programming, and it's our whole life's journey to discover for ourselves how we will live into that programming.

I think that's something Jesus Christ recognized; I think the reason that Christ identified love as the central drive of our religion is that it is so foundational to who and what we are. In his answer to the Pharisees in our reading today, he described to us the core of our faith life—the foundation of a Christian life and the heart of a life closer to God.

More than a thousand years before Christ, Moses brought the Ten Commandments to the people of God, a holy covenant for a life lived hand-in-hand with God. Over the centuries, the Jewish people came to identify as many as 613 commandments revealed in Scripture that describe their right relationship with God and Creation. So when the Pharisees asked Jesus what the most important *commandment* was, I think we can all recognize that that was quite a tall task.

Now, Jesus knew there was a *right* answer to this. The Pharisees and the Jewish people as a whole—of which he was one—had spent hundreds and hundreds of years

wrestling with questions just like that. If he had said *anything* other than “love the Lord your God,” he probably would have been strung up as a heretic right then and there. But rather than just answer by rote the question that everybody already *knew* the answer to, I think that Jesus took the opportunity to teach us all something *about* that answer that we *didn't* already know... and I think that's clear in the *way* he answered it.

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?’ 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.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Jesus didn't pause after giving the *correct* answer to allow the Pharisees time to ask another question, and I think that's telling. I believe it's telling that to Jesus the commandment to love your God with your whole being didn't exist without the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself. In my reading of this passage, there isn't a hierarchy here; you can't have the one commandment without the other... and on these *two* hang all the law and the prophets—the whole Bible, the entirety of God's messages to humanity: without these two commandments to love God and to love your neighbor as yourself, the whole thing falls apart. There is no right relationship with God without building it on these two principles of love.

I think what Jesus was trying to teach us by tying these two commandments together was that you *can't* love God without loving your neighbor as yourself. Loving *God* in a vacuum, Jesus seems to say, isn't enough. And that's something I want you to really hear today. If it comes easy to us to love *God*, but it *doesn't* come easy to us to love our neighbors, one another, our human siblings... then we are missing a critical component in our Christian life, and I would even venture to say our *human* life.

Now, I'm making a distinction here, because like I said at the start, as humans, loving *others* actually comes easy to us. It's baked into us. And the distinction I'm making *is* that it's absolutely possible to love *others* without loving *God*. People do it all the time. There are probably like three or four *billion* people in this world who don't love God, but *do* love others. There are so many people—and many in each of our lives—who don't go to a church, a synagogue, or a mosque, who don't pray, who don't give selflessly of themselves to a greater power, who don't feel warmth and joy in their heart when they're in the presence of the Most High... but *who*—all the *same*—fall in *love*, have children, cry at funerals, care for the poor, and are inspired to action at the sight of injustice and pain. People are loving their neighbors all the *time*, and an atheist can do it just as easily, and

just as effectively, as any person who loves *God*. Maybe that's a scandalous thing for a pastor to say, but it is what it is.

But that's the *horizontal* relationship—the human-to-*human* relationship—that's easy. God *knows* the human race can be hard to love, but if we *allow* ourselves, and if we work at it every day, it's easy to see ourselves *in* our neighbors and respond in kind, because in the end we're all *people*. Full of *differences* to be sure—differences that shouldn't be ignored, and *many* differences we should celebrate—but we all share our human-ness.

The *vertical* relationship on the other hand—the vertical part of this vertical-horizontal cross that we're making here—is loving *God*, and that's a little bit more *complicated*, even though *sitting* here, most of us as Christians might be tempted to—knee-jerk response—say we think loving *God* is a lot easier than loving *people*.

But is what we're thinking when we say we love God *really* loving God? I mean we *worship* God, to be sure; I mean here we are. Many of us *pray* to God. *Many* of us even dedicate some of our time and some of our treasure to the work of God. But how often do we ever really sit and investigate our deepest *feelings* toward God? Do we love God, or are we *obligated* to God? Do we love God, or do we just *work* for God? Do we love God, or are we just *committed* to God? Do we love God, or are we *afraid* of God? Do we love God... or do we just *worship* God?

Because Jesus Christ himself said *worshipping* God isn't enough. We aren't really Christians until we *love* the Lord our God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind. And really *doing* that can be a lifelong journey.

Really, how do you love someone—I mean, some *Thing*—that we've never even seen? How do we *love* someone whose voice we have never heard or whose touch we have never felt? Not in the same way that we can see or hear or touch another human being, anyway.

The answer, I believe, is remembering... that you can love your neighbors without loving God, but you can't love *God* without loving your *neighbors*.

Every single human being on this planet—Christians, Jews, Muslims, Hindus, Atheists, Agnostics, and everyone in between and beyond—*all* are made in the image of God. We were molded by God, given breath by God, and apart from God no thing was created. Christ Himself said that He could be found in each and every person on this Earth. Remember?

“Lord, when was it that we saw you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not take care of you?” Then he will answer them, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.”

We cannot love God without loving our neighbors as ourselves. No matter how much we commit ourselves to the God that created us, there will always be a part of God that is *out of our reach* if we do not love *others*.

So as hard as it can be to love this big messed-up human family and all of its little messed-up individuals... remember that if you are *here*, it means that at the *very* least some small part of you wants to love *God*... and as hard as people can *be* to *love* sometimes... remember the baby... and just how *easy* loving others really should be.

Amen.