

Who's on First?
A Sermon by Louise Westfall
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
Cleveland Heights, Ohio
23 October 2005
Text: Matthew 22:34-46

I used to quiz my son about what he had learned at Sunday School. He quickly figured out that his response was generally acceptable if it involved "God" and "love." What it lacked in specificity, it definitely made up for in over-all significance. There really isn't anything I'd rather have Paul—or anybody—know than the creative and redemptive love of God for him personally and for all people. It is the one true thing upon which to build a life. It is the answer to every human question. And it calls us to the most important response any of us has to make.

God said it first. Then Moses passed it along to the people of Israel on their way out of slavery in Egypt. Centuries later their priests and prophets recalled it and wrote it down –on scrolls that would become the book of Deuteronomy in the Old Testament –but also in boxes fastened to their forehead, and placed near the doorway of their home. So they wouldn't forget. So it would be literally at the forefront of their minds, and at the center of their family life. It's recited again in our morning text, framed as Jesus' response to the test of the religious leaders: *Which commandment in the Law is the greatest?* Jesus' answer is a slightly-edited version of a longer one recorded in the earlier Gospel according to Mark. But here it is, what someone has called the "heartbeat of the Bible," the central theme around which everything else about faith revolves. Listen for God's Word to the church in the reading found on New Testament page 25 of the chapel/pew Bibles, OR what Matthew says that Mark said that Jesus said what he had read in Deuteronomy which says that Moses said that God said....

Reading from the gospel according to Matthew, in the 22nd chapter at the 34th verse. [Matthew 22:34-46; the trajectory of Deuteronomic history is outlined by Patrick J. Willson, *Lectionary Homiletics, Volume XVI, Number 6, p. 2*]

In my mind's eye I picture a scene like that old ad for E.F. Hutton. The crowd is jostling around; the religious leaders are posturing; the disciples are busy finding seats for everyone and suddenly everything stops. Everyone perks up, straining to hear how Jesus will answer the question put to him by the religious leaders. Though they mean it as a trap, Jesus speaks up without hesitation. *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind...and...you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

Did the crowd let out a collective sigh of disappointment? The commandments Jesus quotes are as old as their religious tradition itself. They already knew that!

...and so do we! I doubt that any person of faith would dispute that love of God, others, and self is the very bedrock of life. So familiar are these words in fact, we might assume this command to be written on every page of the Bible. Actually this is not the case. We read far more about "praising" God, "worshiping" God, and "obeying" God than we do "loving" God. Jesus makes it first, the greatest commandment on which all the others depend. Nothing is more important. This is the gold standard, and to this day, the Church measures questions about scriptural interpretation and matters of practice and faith, against it. Our worship, the Christian education we offer, the mission we do, the pronouncements we make—everything should be measured by whether or not it promotes the love of God and the love of neighbor.

We know this, and yet we don't. I have never officiated at a wedding in which the couple believed themselves otherwise than completely in love and committed to a lifetime union. And yet, many of those marriages have failed. I have never baptized a child without the promise of the parents and the

congregation to love that child and nurture their growth in Christian faith. Yet our busy family lives make it very difficult to make that faith a top priority. Recruiting Sunday School teachers and shepherds is one of the hardest jobs our Children's Ministry Committee undertakes. The heart of the gospel is that God loves and accepts us unconditionally; yet teen suicide has reached epidemic proportion. Spirituality is booming –heralds the secular press—and there have never been more options for groups and practices designed to connect people with God. Yet many do not find truth beyond sound bites and slogans that serve little else than to divide them against neighbor and bring them no closer to God. How can we make the greatest commandment our rule, our foundation, our anchor?

The big clue comes in the second part of the reading, in which Jesus turns the tables on the religious leaders and asks them a question. While to our ears this question might sound irrelevant or arcane, to the religious leaders of Jesus' day it would have cut to the chase of their hopes for the Promised One who would save the people. *What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?* Their rote response is countered with the very scriptures they knew so well, and they are confounded and silenced for awhile. That the gospel writer included this exchange here testifies to the early Church's understanding of Jesus as the "Lord" to which David deferred. Jesus came not merely to remind people to love God and love neighbor, he became the way to its fulfillment. He showed us what love looks like and how it acts. In what seemed like the end, Jesus gave his life for love. In what turned out to be the beginning, love overcame death. Fact is, a law cannot make us loving. What imbues us with the power to love is a relationship with the Source of love, mediated for Christians through Christ, and demonstrated through the imperfect people known as "the body of Christ."

Today we will/we have baptized some babies, splashed water on their heads and proclaimed brave and true things about their origin and destiny. I always marvel at this sacrament,

because not one of us knows what lies ahead for Kayte, Molly, or Ryken—or any of our children-- or ourselves.

And yet in a way we do. There is a scene at the end of the very first Harry Potter book, in which the wise and good wizard Dumbledore tells Harry what has happened to him. Harry has had a violent confrontation with the evil Voldemort that has left him bruised and deeply shaken. Dumbledore asks Harry if he knows why Voldemort had not been able to restrain Harry during the struggle. "It was because of your mother," Dumbledore explains. "She sacrificed herself for you and that kind of act leaves a mark." Harry's bandaged hand reaches up to the mark on his forehead. "Oh, no," Dumbledore continues, "this is the kind of mark that cannot be seen. It lives in your very skin. What is it? Love, Harry----love."

Friends, we too are graced with this inheritance of love, and baptism marks us with its invisible sign. One church I know concludes the baptismal liturgy this way: *Little child, your baptism marks you as Christ's own. For you, Christ lived. For you, Christ died. For you, Christ rose and reigns forever. And you, little child, know nothing of this. So comes to pass the saying, 'We love because God first loved us.'*

God's love for us produces love in us. Powerful, transforming love that is stronger than anything else. Love that lasts forever.

What may be easy to affirm in the tender lives of these precious children, however, is equally true out there, in the real world of exquisite beauty and profound suffering, in which goodness and evil reside in close proximity. We take the love by which we have been loved and ...love: God, neighbor, and self. It takes practice. It may be accompanied by feelings of affection and a sense of accomplishment. But not always. Sometimes love is demonstrated best by simply showing up. By resolving to act on another's behalf. By extending oneself beyond the circle of family and friends.

Our stewardship of God's gifts is a measure of our love to God "with all our heart, and with all our soul, and with all our mind...and our neighbors as ourselves." We know people can worship God anywhere, in any condition, but we notice they seem to respond better if their teeth aren't chattering and water isn't dripping on them, and they can hear. So we turn on the heat, we repair the roof, we invest in a sound system that works. We know children and youth and adults have different needs and multiple ways of learning. One size does not fit all. So we plan for faith formation spanning a lifetime. It takes staff and space and equipment, and we do it, because Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself."

We open our doors to middle school kids after the school day, we keep the lights burning in the night to offer hospitality to neighbors in 12-step groups, we spend a Saturday building with Habitat for Humanity, or moving furniture into a home for Katrina victims, or pulling weeds at Heights Youth Club. Why? Because Jesus said "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Love is what finally drives our budget and our mission, and love is what should be our first consideration as we make our commitments.

Someone told me recently that the Beatles' song "All You Need Is Love" remains the top-selling tune of all time. You may quibble at the statistic, but there's no denying the truth of it. Without love, we are noisy gongs and clashing cymbals—loud and showy perhaps, but purposeless and empty. Friends, let us recommit ourselves this day to the One who is the Source of life and Author of love, who loves us and calls us to love.

THANKS BE TO GOD! AMEN.

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