

A Sermon by Rev. Eric R. Dillenbeck
“Love the Lord, Your God”
Fairmount Presbyterian Church
October 26, 2008

Our passage today comes after Jesus has entered into Jerusalem near the end of his earthly life and ministry. His time in the city has been fraught with tension. During his time in the city he has been surrounded by the Sadducees and Pharisees. They have been aggressively trying to highlight his heretical ways and make it easier to discredit and get rid of this walking problem. But things do not go as planned for those in charge. Every time Jesus manages to pick apart all of their arguments and reframe the questions on his own terms. Through the palpable tension present in text, let us listen for God’s Word speaking to us today from the Gospel according to

Matthew 22:34-46

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together,
³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked Jesus a question to test him.

³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷Jesus said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’
³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

⁴¹Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴²“What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” ⁴³He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ⁴⁴‘The Lord said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet”’? ⁴⁵If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?”

⁴⁶No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

The Word of the Lord

Thanks be to God

You shall Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself. The question, in jeopardy format please:

What are the greatest commandments? What is the Golden rule? Either will do.

This passage is so well known. It is one of the first ones children learn because it makes sense, it’s a good life lesson. I remember learning it in my public elementary school. How do you treat others? As you want to be treated. Of course!

It is so obvious that we wonder, why does this lawyer waste his time with this question? But we tend to forget that there were tons of commandments to choose from. The image of Moses with those tablets is so powerful that we might think there are only 10 commandments in the Old Testament. But if you look through the whole of the OT you will find there are 613 commandments on how we are called to live.

If you tried to apply all of those to your life at once you would find it nearly impossible to move a muscle without being in violation of some heavenly law. So, while the question does seem obvious to us, there was some intrigue to the inquiry.

How would Jesus interpret the Law of God? How would he navigate through 613 commandments to find the one he felt summed up the rest?

“Love the Lord your God, with all your heart, with all your soul and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself.

With his answer, Jesus sums up the heart of the faith of Israel. With his answer Jesus restores the law’s intended focus on the community’s relationship with God. He affirms that God’s law is not about regulations, rules and punishments, but about JUST relationships between God and people.

With his answer, Jesus brings together religion and ethics and in so doing holds a mirror up to the Pharisees, reminding them that the Law was a GIFT from God intended to bring about better relationships.

These two commandments are inseparable. Our first priority in life is to Love God and to enjoy God forever.

But what we inevitably discover, is that when we love God, God’s abundant grace moves us. It changes how we see the world and in loving our neighbors our love of God finds expression here on earth. In that way, God’s reign gets worked out right here in our midst.

Of course, here is where it gets sticky. How do we love our neighbors? The problem is, Love gets complicated, at least the love Jesus was talking about. Modern poets, and I use that word loosely here, have either made LOVE a really pretty affair or a self obsessed pursuit. When we turn on the radio these poets sing to us about a
...Love which lifts us up where we belong.

We hear about a Love that tells us to throw our lives away, for one happy day...

We are reminded that “All we need is love”

LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE LOVE.

All these songs about love, but these poets seem to miss the mark. The words of Mariah Carey, Elton John, Whitney Houston, Joe Cocker, Celine Dion and so many others have defined love on their terms.

But in his response to the Pharisees Jesus reminds us that LOVE is defined by our worship and relationship with God, not by the ways of the world. How we love our neighbors is defined by how God loves us and we see that love at work in our lives in the person of Jesus Christ, who came because God SO loved the world.

Will Willimon reminds us that “Christians don’t simply believe in ‘love,’ we believe that love is defined by the suffering, sacrificial, non-violent action we witnessed in the life and ministry of Jesus the Christ.

But how does that suffering, sacrificial, non-violent love get played out as we love our neighbors?

When I think about that question the words of Marcia Riggs, my Ethics professor at Columbia Seminary come to mind. She told us in class one day, theologians throughout the ages have misinterpreted today’s passage. God does not call us to love our neighbors as we want to be loved. God calls us to love our neighbors as THEY want to be LOVED.

If we love our neighbors as WE want to be loved then our loving behavior continues to be all about us. Anita Burnett summed it up pretty well the other day. She told me, It would be as if I said, “Oh, I’m cold...here YOU should put on a sweater.” My loving action acknowledged that I was cold and assumed you were too. I never paused to ask you if you were cold and needed a sweater.

At a conference this past week, my friend Rodger Nishioka told a story about going to Nicaragua with a group of young people for a mission trip. While there the group was out in the middle of a dense and remote rain forest working on some eco-friendly projects intended to help the local economy. Every day Rodger walked past this huge trailer – the kind pulled by 18 wheelers. It had obviously been there for a long time. After walking past this trailer for a few days Rodger’s curiosity finally got the better of him and he asked his guide about it. The guide said, “Oh that, it came from some people in Ohio, Cincinnati Ohio actually.” Rodger asked, “well, what’s in it?” At this the man stopped and looked at him and then brought him over to see for himself. As he opened the door to the trailer, the guide said, I believe they are called TOASTERS.

Now remember, this group is located in the middle of a dense and remote rain forest. They don’t have electricity and they did not even know what a toaster was.

Some well meaning group in Cincinnati shipped thousands of toasters to these people in Nicaragua. I am sure those folks in Cincinnati were simply trying to love others as they would want to be loved, but my guess is in the process they never really considered how the recipients might want to be loved. They forgot to consider what this group might really need or want.

Our love for God and our experience of the abundance of God's grace push us outside of ourselves and get us engaged in the lives of those around us.

We see this in the way Jesus carried himself. He not only healed physical ailments, but also restored those he healed to wholeness in the eyes of their communities. He stopped and spoke with the hemorrhaging woman, he invited a tax collector to dinner, and he raised a dead man from the dead. These loving acts were not easy and were definitely not clean cut.

Love for neighbor is messy. It is not a neat and orderly affair. It requires us to know and to be known so that in the midst of relationship God might be about the work of re-creation.

In all we do, may we love God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind and in the same way, may we love our neighbors as they would want to be loved and in so doing may we risk getting involved in the messy business of being God's people here on earth.

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