

“The Greatest Commandment: Love!”

Date: October 23, 2011

Occasion: Pentecost 19

Place: Lakewood UMC

Texts: Matthew 22:34-40; 1 John 4:7-12

Theme: Love

Before we try to tackle this piece of Scripture, I'd like to share an observation that was made at a continuing education event I attended last week. Dr. Mark Allen Powell was the speaker down at Church of the Covenant, speaking about the teachings and the ethics of Jesus. Before he taught his material, he made this observation:

We as Christians need to be careful in the way that we read and interpret the Scriptures, lest we be rightly accused of being anti-Semitic. He said, we Christians have a bias, in reading our Bible, that all of the Jews were against Jesus, and the religious leaders in his time were particularly hateful, mean, and ignorant. And when Jesus spoke, he pronounced things that the world had never heard before. Not so!

The Pharisees, whom we meet in today's lesson, were *not* inherently bad people. They were defending the faith as they understood it. Not unlike what you and I would do if someone were to present new ideas that challenged what we believed. We would want to defend the tradition that we have come to know and love. Right? I would.

So, I will grant that the Pharisees felt threatened by Jesus. But let's not assume that they were all mean, and hateful. After all, as a people who seek to practice the virtue of love, it is the least we can do - to give people the benefit of the doubt, rather than assuming that we already know all there is to know about them.

You and I are living in an age when people are quick to pigeon-hole other people. We're all guilty of it. We put a label on someone and then assume that we

know the totality of who they are, be it Muslim or Jew, Democrat or Republican, conservative or liberal. Those labels do not tell us all there is to know about a person.

Love requires that we get to know a person more fully before drawing any conclusions.

So, let me ask you a question. Do you have a favorite scripture passage? A verse or two that means a lot to you, perhaps a passage that you learned in Sunday School, or a verse that has helped to carry you through hard times? Why is that passage so important to you?

Well, the Pharisees did not ask Jesus what his favorite scripture was. Instead, they asked him which of the commandments was the most important. “Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” There are 632 laws and rules in the Hebrew Bible. The Pharisees wanted to know which one Jesus would lift up above the others.

Jesus replied, “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart and mind and strength. And the second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Honestly, there is nothing terribly shocking in Jesus’ answer. Jews then & today would probably find themselves in agreement with Jesus. His answer is not controversial.

I took the Confirmation Class to the Temple in Erie two years ago, and we participated in a Friday *Sabaath* service. We observed firsthand how the Shema, the great commandment, was a central part of their worship experience. In fact, Orthodox Jews wear reminders of this commandment on their clothing, and they place a little box in their door-way, so that when they enter and leave their home, they are reminded that God should be their highest priority and their greatest love.

Perhaps the Pharisees and Sadducees were threatened by this new and popular preacher, but they could find no fault with his theology. They were in agreement with it. And they stopped asking him questions. But *I'm* not finished asking questions. It sounds so easy, just love God and love your neighbor and that's the whole Bible in a nutshell. But, *how easy is it* to practice this easy-sounding, great commandment?

Not so easy. Someone placed a note in my mailbox while I was gone this week. It beautifully illustrates the dilemma that we face. Let me read it to you, and maybe you've heard it before. It says: "Dear Lord, so far today I've done all right. I haven't gossiped, haven't lost my temper, haven't been grouchy, nasty, selfish or over-indulgent. I'm thankful for that. But in a few minutes, God, I'm going to get out of bed. And from then on, I'm probably going to need a lot more help. Amen."

The truth is, it isn't easy to love. It's such an easy thing to say, and yet, such a challenging thing to do - to love God with all of your heart and mind and strength, and to love our neighbor as ourselves. The truth is, some of us have a hard time loving ourselves, let alone others. Maybe that is part of our problem. We can't give what we haven't got. If we've not experienced love, it's hard to give away.

In an average year in the United States, 22,000 people kill themselves. And, 100,000 more try. There is such a sadness and a pathos when you consider a person's desire to end their own life. If you've never been that low before, it's an awful feeling to wish that your life would be over. To believe that death is the best alternative you can come up with. The world is an awfully dark place for those persons.

But if we are God's creation, and if we are created in God's image, we must think well of ourselves. We are well-made. We are God's handiwork. We are

created with many of the qualities of God's character and nature. There is an important lesson here - We are to love ourselves. I don't mean self-absorption and narcissism. But we need to own and declare, we are God-made. And God don't make no junk! Amen?

But love of self is not the greatest commandment, is it? A lot of people seem to think so. They have an unhealthy regard for themselves, and they seem to think of no one else but themselves. But what was that great commandment again? "You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart and soul and strength?"

Well, do you? Is God your greatest love and your highest priority? Really? What evidence can you provide that would convince anyone who asks, that you really do love God with all that you have, and all that you are? What would that look like? Most Christians that I know live a double life. They profess with their mouth that God is the most important thing in the world to them. But then they live for themselves. How would our lives look, different, if God was our highest priority and our greatest love?

If we as a Family of God ever took seriously loving God with our whole self, we would be something to behold! Everyone in this congregation would be an evangelist, and we'd be receiving 100's of new people every month. Everyone would be tithing, and we'd have so much extra that we would have to recruit new counters, and find new ways of using the money in ministry to a hurting world.

We would need extra Sunday School teachers to lead all of the classes for the people who want to know God better. We would have to add additional worship services because so many people would want to come and praise our wonderful God.

When a teenager falls in love, everything he or she does revolves around the

one he or she loves. So, too, with us. If we loved God with everything we are, we would find it easy to love others, and easy to love ourselves. Love of God transforms who we are. Jesus showed us what God is like. God is pure love.

So what stands in the way? Why don't we love God like this? Many of us are easily distracted. We find other things, lesser things, to take God's place. We get pre-occupied with life and keeping all of the balls in the air. And we forget our true love.

But here the good news. God never forgets God's true love.

God is always there - wooing us, loving us, giving us another chance. Why? Because that's the way of love. God loves us so much, God will not give up on us. God keeps coming to us, and offering us this amazing gift - the gift of God's own self. No, its not easy to love God and neighbor and self. But once you've tasted the excellence of God's love, there's no turning back. Beloved, let us love, because God 1st loved us.