

Sermon: “All You Need is Love”

10/25/2020

Let us pray. May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Ever since being told that prostitutes and tax collectors would enter the Kingdom of God ahead of them, the Pharisees and chief priests had been plotting. They needed to think of a question that would break Jesus’ hold over his fellow Israelites, so that they could finally arrest and punish him without angering the crowd. Now, they knew that not just any question would do. So they gathered together and started brainstorming. Two of the questions they devised far exceeded the rest. The first, about whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, was designed to make Jesus choose between pledging his allegiance to God and pledging his allegiance to Rome. For the Pharisees and chief priests, either answer would do. The second question asked who a woman would be married to in heaven after having been married and widowed seven times. Much like the question of whether God can make a rock so big that God cannot lift it, it was designed to not have an answer. They asked both questions to Jesus and each time he responded with answers that they could not have anticipated. Answers that left them looking like the fools and hypocrites, while further astonishing the crowd. It was then, in that moment of silence, that one of the Pharisees stepped forward and asked Jesus one last question, likely the only question he could think of: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

The chance of trapping Jesus with this question was slim. Every morning and night, tradition dictated that the Jewish people recite the “Shema,” a prayer from Deuteronomy which begins, “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 might.” These words were to be kept in their hearts, recited to their children, discussed in their homes, bound as a sign on their hands,

fixed as emblems on their foreheads, and written on the doorposts of their homes and gates. Jesus surely knew and had prayed this prayer thousands upon thousands of times, so I imagine there was no surprise when he responded by quoting it. If there was any surprise, it arose when he went on to recite yet another passage, this one from Leviticus, “you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” He had answered correctly, albeit with a twist.

This past year, New York Life aired a Super Bowl commercial that begins, “The ancient Greeks had four words for love.” After describing love as *philia*, *storge*, and *eros*, the narrator goes on to speak of a different and more admirable form, that of *agape*, or love as an action. When Jesus responded to the Pharisee that day, he was not seeking to convince him that he should buy an insurance policy out of love. Rather, Jesus was seeking to impress on him, as well as us gathered here today, that love is more than just an emotion. If we truly love God with all our heart, with all our soul, and with all our mind, then we will desire to put that love into action. We will long to participate in the means of grace, like attending worship, reading Scripture, and prayer, among the many other ways that God’s grace is available to us. And we will long to share that love with others, with our neighbor, no matter whom or what they might be. In the passage from Leviticus, our neighbor is described not just as our family, friends, or the person living next door, but as the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner. We have been called to love everyone, even the least among us, especially the least among us, and when we don’t, it says something about our love of God, because our love of God and our love of neighbor can never be fully separated.

“On these two commandments,” Jesus concludes, “hang all the law and the prophets.” All that God has revealed in Scripture is meant to help us learn how to love God and our neighbor, and to help us recognize when we have gone astray, so that we might repent and turn back.

“Let’s see,” we can hear Jesus think to himself, “just how committed you truly are to this teaching. What do you think of the Messiah,” he goes on to ask the Pharisees. “Whose son is he?” The Pharisees, drawing directly on the prophets, declare that he will be the “Son of David.” “Yes,” Jesus responds, “the Messiah will be a descendant of David, but not just that. For generations, you have believed that the ‘Son of David’ will be a future king who will rule over Israel, use the sword to reclaim the Promised Land, and secure peace throughout the world. How is it, then that David calls him ‘Lord’?”

Before that moment, Psalm 110—“The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’”—had never been interpreted as a “messianic” psalm. Amidst all the discussion of which Lord David was referring to, the Pharisees and chief priests had never thought that he might be referring to his own descendent. By quoting this passage to them, Jesus was challenged them to see the psalm in a new light. “If David thus calls him Lord,” Jesus continues, “how can he be his son?” Or to put Jesus’ question a different way, “how can you explain David calling his son Lord and bowing down to him, unless his son is more than merely human? Unless his son, the Messiah, is both human and divine? Unless he is also the Son of God?” No one there answered him, nor did they dare ask him any more questions. Likely because they realized just how compromised of a position Jesus had just put them in.

In that brief exchange, Jesus declared to the Pharisees and chief priests that he is both the Lord their God and their neighbor. Which begs the question: “Do you love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind, and do you love your neighbor as yourself? Do you, Pharisees and chief priests, love me, the Son of God and Son of David, standing before you today? If so, confess who I am. Confess that I am the Lord and that the Father has sent me to show you the way. To show you what it means to love God—Father, Son,

and Holy Ghost. That loving God is more than just an emotion, but placing everything we have in God's hands. That loving God requires that we take up our cross, wherever it might lead us. And that if we love God, we will love our neighbor as well, whomever and whatever they might be.”

Just after today's Gospel lesson, Jesus instructs the crowd to not act like the Pharisees and chief priests. He had witnessed how they followed the law so that they might be respected and adored, rather than out of their love for God and neighbor. Our intentions matter. They are what separate an act born out of love from an act born out of selfishness. They are why Jesus, just a few days later, was willing to die on the cross, because Jesus loves each and every one of us that much. Such a cross was surely a difficult burden to bear, and one which has led many Christians to feel as if we must devote our entire lives to doing good to others. That love of neighbor requires that we always be open to emotional exhaustion, physical burnout, psychological manipulation, and relentless guilt. That love is a zero-sum game, in which we only have so much to give, so we must choose between loving others and loving ourselves, with the correct choice being quite clear.

But notice, Jesus did not just say that we are called to love our neighbor. We've been called to love our neighbor as ourselves. One of my previous pastors, when preaching on this passage, once offered a word of advice to those struggling with self-love out of fear of being called selfish. “When you hear the words ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’” he preached that day, “swap the words round and say, ‘Love yourself as your neighbor.’” In other words, don't forget that you are one of the people that you have been called to love.

A few years ago, Mallory, Thane, and I went out to dinner with her parents and her aunt and uncle. Thane was about Tyler's age, just old enough to not be content ever sitting in one

place, but not old enough to be entertained by an iPad or Kindle. As we sat there, waiting for our food, it soon became clear that a meltdown was on the horizon if he stayed in his highchair. Since the dinner was with Mallory's side of the family, I took Thane outside to the patio area, where there was a small pond and fountain, and plenty of space to walk around. For quite some time we walked around outside, until the dinner was essentially over and it was time to leave. When we got home, Mallory asked me why I seemed so stressed and short-tempered. I responded, quite bluntly, that it was because, while she and her family had been enjoying a nice dinner, I had been starving outside. I had been so committed to being the sacrificial lamb, that I had barely eaten anything that night. I had been so concerned about loving my neighbor that I had failed to adequately love myself.

There are times in each of our lives when we need to practice a little self-love. When we need someone else to look after the kid, so we can sit down and get a bite to eat; or when we need someone to pray for us, rather than be the one always offering the prayer; or when we need to take some time for ourselves, so we don't answer that phone call from a friend and rush over at a moment's notice. When we love ourselves as our neighbor, when we love ourselves as God intends, we help make sure that we can and do love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind, and that we can and do can love our neighbor as ourselves. You see, it's all connected, because, as the Beatles so famously sang, when it comes to what God desires of us, "All you need is love, all you need is love, all you need is love, love, love is all you need." Amen.