

**21 Pentecost
October 25, 2020**

**In the name of the God of all Creation,
The God alive in each of us as God was alive in Jesus,
And the power of God known in the Spirit.
Amen.**

In our lectionary reading from Matthew's Gospel this morning, the Pharisees appoint a lawyer to ask Jesus yet another "test" question: "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus answers without a moment's hesitation:

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all our mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'"

There are similar stories in both Mark's and Luke's gospels, and these are all references to a passage in the Book of Deuteronomy. The recitation is known as the Shema from the first two words in Hebrew, "*Shema Yisrael*" ... "Hear, O Israel."

*"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. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates."
(Deuteronomy 6:4-9)*

To this day, observant Jews recite the Shema every morning and every evening. Many Orthodox Jews wear tefillin ... small leather boxes containing the Shema ... on their foreheads and on their arms or hands. And lots of Jews have Mezuzahs on the doorpost of their homes and touch them as they enter and leave. They are reminded on a regular basis of the commandment to love God, and love their neighbor.

So ... love God ... love your neighbor. On these two commandments hang everything else that matters in this world. If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously, then we had better pay attention.

Let me start by pointing out what Jesus doesn't say in response to the Pharisees' question. Remember, at this point in the story, Jesus's crucifixion is just days away. Death is literally breathing down his neck, and he is rapidly running out of opportunities to communicate the heart of his message. But, when he is asked what matters most in a life of faith, Jesus doesn't say, "Believe the right things." He doesn't say, "Read your Bible," or "Pray

every day,” or “Preach the Gospel to every living creature.” He says, “Love.” That’s it. All of our faith is distilled down to its essence so that maybe we’ll pause long enough to hear it. Love ... love God and love your neighbor.

But what does it mean to do this? How are we to love? This is where, I fear, our overuse ... our misuse ... and even our abuse of the word “love” gets us into trouble. We claim to “love” many things. We “love” our favorite celebrities, movies, bands, and TV shows. We “love” going on vacation, or reading good novel, or watching our favorite sports team. We “love” chocolate ... or bacon or barbequed chicken.

In other words, shaped as we are by movies, TV, romance novels, and Facebook posts, we tend to think of love as a feeling ... an emotion. A spontaneous and free-flowing feeling that arises out of our own enjoyment and pleasure ... our own sense of attraction and affinity. What we don’t do is think of love as a discipline ... as a practice ... as something we exercise ... as an effort ... as a commitment. Instead, we talk about falling in love. We insist that love is blind, that it happens at first sight, that it breaks our hearts, and that its course never runs smooth. We talk and think about love as if we have little control over its power or agency in its presence.

However, this is not how the Bible describes love. Jesus doesn’t say, “I sure hope love happens to you.” Rather, he says, “Love is the greatest and first commandment.” Jesus is saying it is not a matter of personal feeling or preference ... it is not a matter of a lucky accident ... it is a matter of commitment living a life fully in God’s image. True love ... in the Biblical sense ... is a prayer. Prayer ... responding to God in thought and deed, with and without words.

Biblical love makes us vulnerable, and to be honest with you there are times when I’d rather not be so vulnerable. Love requires trust, and sometimes I’m skeptical and suspicious. Love takes time ... it takes effort and it takes discipline ... and sometimes I have other things upon which I’d rather spend my time and energy.

So, what would it cost us to take Jesus’s version of love seriously? To practice and cultivate a depth of compassion that’s gut-wrenching? To train ourselves into a hunger for justice so powerful and so urgent that we rearrange our lives in order to pursue it? To pray for the kind of empathy that causes our hearts to break?

We have a God who first and foremost wants our love ... not our fear ... not our regret ... not even our piety. And ... most importantly ... we have a God who wants every one of God’s children to feel loved ... to feel loved by us ... not shamed ... not punished ... not chastised ... not judged ... but loved.

I don’t think it’s a coincidence or a mistake that Jesus links love of God with love of neighbor. Each reinforces, reinterprets, and revives the other. We cannot love God while we refuse to love what God loves. We cannot love God in a sterile, disembodied way that doesn’t touch the depth and pain of this world.

Neither can we love ourselves or our neighbors in any meaningful, sustainable way if that love is not sourced and replenished in an abiding love for God. Only God's love is inexhaustible ... if we cut ourselves off from the flow of God's compassion, we will quickly run dry.

In other words, the motion of our hearts must be cyclical ... love of God making possible and deepening our love of neighbor, and love of neighbor putting flesh and bones on our love for God. Biblical love is not passive. It is not something that occurs to us without our control or will. Biblical love is something we do.

There are instructions scattered throughout the New Testament that offer real-world applications of what Jesus' brand of love looks like. The apostle Paul, in a letter to Christians living in the Roman province of Galatia, addressed the relationship question. He showed that God always nudges us in the direction of kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

And, Paul's most detailed description of what real-world love looks and acts like is found in his first letter to the Christians living in first-century Corinth.

Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. (1 Corinthians 13:4-6)

First of all, love requires patience ... love is not pushy. Love requires that I move at your pace rather than requiring that you move at mine.

Love requires kindness ... kindness is love's response to weakness. Kindness is the choice to loan others our strength rather than reminding them of their weakness. It's doing for others what they cannot in that moment do for themselves.

Love requires us to keep envy and pride from interfering with our ability to celebrate the success of others ... love requires us to allow others to shine. It isn't threatened by the success of others.

Love requires us to show respect to others ... love never treats another person dishonorably, disgracefully, or indecently. Love doesn't create regret ... after all, respect is at the heart of every satisfying relationship.

Love requires selflessness ... love is not self-seeking or selfish. It puts the interests and needs of others first.

Love is not easily angered ... it is not easily stirred up or provoked. Instead, love absorbs. Love puts the other person's story ahead of its own.

Love requires us to forgive ... love keeps no record of wrongs. Love is not about powering up. Love is about stepping down.

Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects ... always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres. Love chooses a generosity of spirit when others don't meet our expectations. Love requires us to do everything in our power to protect or guard each other.

So, what is it that we are commanded to do? If we are to take seriously what Jesus took seriously Jesus who stood in the presence of his accusers and enemies ... Jesus who declared love the be-all and end-all. ... then we are to do the same.

The call is to weep with those who weep. To laugh with those who laugh. To touch the untouchables, feed the hungry, welcome the children, release the captives, forgive the sinners, confront the oppressors and comfort the oppressed, hold each other close, and tell each other the truth.

“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all our mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”

I recently came across this poem/prayer. It seems a fitting end to this sermon.

The world now is too dangerous and too beautiful
for anything but love.

May your eyes be so blessed you see God in everyone.

May your ears be so blessed, you hear the cry of the poor.

May your hands be so blessed that everything you touch is a sacrament.

May your lips be so blessed, you speak nothing but the truth with love.

May your feet be so blessed you run to those who need you.

And may your heart be so opened, so set on fire, that your love ... *your* love ... changes everything.

And may the blessing of the God who created you, loves you,
and sustains you, be with you now and always.

May it be so.

Amen.