

Sermon: Called to Love

Matthew 22:34-46

*Sermon for Meadowbrook Congregational Church by Dr. Katelyn Brackney
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The Greatest Commandment

³⁴ When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵ and one of them, an expert in the law, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶ “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷ He said to him, “ ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

The Question about David's Son

⁴¹ Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: ⁴² “What do you think of the Messiah?^[c] Whose son is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” ⁴³ He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit^[d] calls him Lord, saying,

⁴⁴ ‘The Lord said to my Lord,

“Sit at my right hand,

until I put your enemies under your feet” ’?

⁴⁵ “If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” ⁴⁶ No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

It feels fitting that today, the day when I am installed and officially accept this call, and when we have made these promises to each other, that our text focuses on the greatest commandments. It is, after all, the foundational work to which we, and all Christians, all people, are called. It is not particular to a time or place, but to people. The way we live out that call varies in beautiful and abundant ways.

But, as we have seen time and again throughout Matthew, it doesn't come without a bit of...challenge. Here at the end of Matthew 22 we see the final story of questioning that Jesus is confronted with as the Pharisees try one more time to trap him into saying something that they can get him in trouble for. Remember, prior to this, in just this chapter, the Pharisees had sent their followers and the Herodians to try and trick Jesus and after that, the Sadducees came and tried to

do the same with a different line of questions – both groups were unsuccessful in getting a reaction out of Jesus the way they had hoped. So now, the Pharisees themselves enter the scene and I can imagine them rolling up, maybe a bit smug, thinking “alright, these others haven’t been able to trap Jesus yet, but surely this will get him.” And they proceed to ask, *“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”*

Now, to us, this seems like a pretty straightforward question, and even makes sense. I’d like to know which commandment is the most important. Seems logical, right? But an important thing to know here is that in Judaism all commandments are seen to have equal importance to God and should be observed for God’s glory, it would have been wrong to argue that some are more important than others on the basis of human opinion (Interpretation, p.258), so the Pharisees are strategic in their questioning – trying to see if Jesus will name one law or commandment as more important than all others. But of course, Jesus knows this, and ultimately doesn’t name just one, but two...and the two he shares shouldn’t have been a surprise, as they are commands they should have already known and been familiar with.

Jesus responds saying, *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.”*³⁸ *This is the greatest and first commandment.* ³⁹ *And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*⁴⁰ *On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”*

The first command comes from the Shema in Deuteronomy 6, which says *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,”* and then the second command comes from a more minor commandment in Leviticus 19 that says, *“you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”* So when Jesus mentions these two commandments, they are not new, nor would this have been the first time they were being mentioned together.

It also shouldn't be surprising to *us* either, if we are familiar at all with the Gospels, as his answers fit well with his teachings throughout Matthew thus far as he shares that the Torah and all its teachings and commands should be viewed through the lens of things like justice, mercy, and faithfulness (Matt. 23:23), and he has already pointed out that the love of neighbor is the "pinnacle command of the Torah" ([Working Preacher - Jeannine K. Brown](#)) in Matthew 5:43-48. So Jesus quoting from Deuteronomy and Leviticus as the greatest commandments is right on track not only with his own teachings, but also with the identity and activity of God all along.

But I don't want us to look over the last line of this section, "on these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets." It is significant because 1) he again states that these two are the greatest commands, together, not just one, and 2) they don't negate other laws, necessarily, but they should inform and shape the way they are lived out.

In the Intro to Christian Faith course I used to teach there is a quote attributed to St. Augustine that we used to use to help students understand calling. We would talk about calling or vocation as the particular identity and activity that each person is called to do and be, and it is a reflection and participation in God's identity and activity. And one of the ways we discern what we are each called to do and be is by paying attention to the things we are passionate about. Not as the only source of discernment, but one of them. And in that conversation we would use this quote by Augustine that says, "Love God and do as you please." You might be able to imagine that some students would go wide-eyed thinking this meant that kind of anything goes. But that's not the case at all. It's not "as long as you love God you're allowed to do whatever you want." But rather, the idea behind this quote is that the first half ("Love God") protects or directs the second ("do as you please"). So our love of God and desire to

participate in the life of God influences what brings us joy, what we love, and those things are worth paying attention to.

So here, Jesus is doing something similar. It's not just "Love God and do as you please..." though that's not wrong, and is part of it. But it's Love God, and love your neighbor as you love yourself. The "Love God" part should still shape and inform everything, but in this moment, particularly the way we love ourselves and our neighbors. And then, the love of God, self, and neighbor should influence how all the other laws are lived. "On these two commands hang all the Law and the Prophets."

Now, the particulars of what this looks like aren't specifically listed, but we can look back at scripture and get a pretty good sense of what loving God, self, and neighbor looks like. In Micah 6:8 we hear about doing justice, loving kindness (or mercy), and walking humbly with God, or as I mentioned a little bit ago, even in Matthew we get some great examples like in Matthew 5, when Jesus has his Sermon the Mount and talks about the least of these, in both the Old and New Testament we see examples of caring for the widow, orphan, and foreigner, for children, for the sick, and outcast. Jesus tells us "whatever you do to the least of these you do to me" just a little later in Matthew 25. There are so many examples we can find in scripture about how these two commands are lived out. And they are not just rules or laws to follow, but invitations into a life lived out of the love of God for the sake of our neighbors, *and* ourselves (not *just* ourselves).

One commentary I read this past week by Douglas R.A. Hare shared something that has stuck with me as I've thought about what it means to love well. In the midst of the constant polarization and othering that happens in our world and discourse today, I think what he shares is especially helpful and poignant. He says,

"In an age when the word "love" is greatly abused, it is important to remember that the primary component of biblical love is not affection but commitment. Warm feelings of gratitude may fill our consciousness as we

consider all that God has done for us, but it is not warm feelings that Deut. 6:5 demands of us but rather stubborn, unwavering commitment.

Similarly, to love our neighbors, including our enemies, does not mean that we must feel affection for them. To love the neighbor is to imitate God by taking their needs seriously.” (Interpretation Commentary, p.260)

So if we take seriously this call to love God and neighbor, we must take seriously the needs our neighbors have as a way of living out the love of God; not love that shows up in warm fuzzy feelings, or the way we say “oh I love that burger,” or even the love we feel for a dear family member or friend. But the love of God that desires the wellbeing and flourishing of all things, the love of God that desires to set things right, that seeks justice, loves mercy, that doesn’t make love and care contingent upon agreeing with someone or speaking kindly to someone, or that only shows up between our love of God and self, but love that is wrapped up in love of God, self, and neighbor.

On the front of your bulletin today is a picture I took while hiking the Camino de Santiago in Spain last year. The whole path is marked by those yellow arrows and shells, and as we were walking that day we noticed under this particular sign someone had written “love is the way.” Such a simple reminder, but so beautiful. Love is the way, my friends.

And we see this kind of love through the identity and activity of God all throughout scripture. This is the kind of love Jesus shares and calls the greatest commandments, this is the kind of love we are called to live out, and that should influence our own lives and the decisions we make day to day. This is the love we are all called to, together. I hope and pray we answer it as we step into this next chapter together.

May it be so. Amen.