

Message: "Discerning Relevant Theology"

Scripture: Matthew 22:34-46

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" ³⁷He 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.

Of all the scripture passages in the Bible, Old and New Testament, even the Apocrypha and the Gnostic Gospels and the Apocalyptic Literature that live largely in obscurity, this passage is thought by many to be the most important scriptural message of them all. This is the passage that has preachers wonder "Do I really have to create a sermon for something so obvious?" or has pastors think "my people know this frontwards and backwards, upside down and inside out; they don't really need me to rehash it again?" It's a passage that even has some wonderfully faithful parishioners thinking "been there; done that."

I'm talking, of course, about the greatest commandment, where Jesus is questioned by a pharisee who is also a lawyer; in this passage he tests Jesus as to his Jewish law expertise. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" asks the lawyer. Please note that the lawyer was possibly asking an honest question without bearing Jesus any particular malice; Pharisees were very practiced at such questioning, probing scripture and traditional interpretations of the law in order to establish their protocols for faithful obedience to Torah. Of course, Jesus spent a lot of time pointing out how the Pharisees tended to go too far with their rigid applications of such understandings; nonetheless, it is not that unusual for a Pharisee to engage in these types of inquiry with all sorts of people.

Jesus has a response which I think the Pharisee both expected and didn't expect. The first part of Jesus's response comes straight out of the Torah, as found in Deuteronomy 6:5 - "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your **might**." That was expected; that was correct according to the Levitical law. But then Jesus went on, adding to this another level of consideration: ³⁹"And there is a second commandment which is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" I can almost see in my mind's eye the Pharisee lawyer raising his eyebrows a bit at this unconventional pairing of

love for God and love of neighbor. The Torah does say that we are to love our neighbor as ourselves (in Leviticus 19:18) but it is in between laws against slander and laws against mixing different kinds of cattle or seed together - it hardly stands out. Thus it was likely this pharisee was preparing himself to argue with Jesus about this understanding or at least ask another question about that second commandment addition when Jesus cuts him off with something I don't think he expected at all. Jesus says ⁴⁰"On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

It is always hard to capture the atmosphere of a scriptural interchange due to historical distance and cultural overtones, but I think it is a safe assumption that Jesus had dropped a bombshell. He had interjected a pretty radical association of love of God with love of neighbor, saying that they provide the entire foundation for Biblical law. Somehow, someway, these two commandments belong together; love of God establishes the priority, but they are more than ordered items in a commandment list; together they provide as the roadmap for understanding all the law and the prophets. Tim Beach-Verhey is a Presbyterian minister, theologian, author, and educator who makes the point that "These two scripture passages together provide a summary of Jesus' mission and ministry. They are alike in the sense that they interpret one another, making it clear that one cannot love God without loving what God loves."

I love that - the idea that our love for God helps us interpret our love for each other, and our love for each other helps us interpret our love for God. Faith seeks to incorporate this understanding into all facets of life, for it to become as natural a part of our being as breathing - or perhaps blinking? Why blinking? I'm glad you asked, for this past week, I had an appointment with my ophthalmologist, or my eye doctor. It was the regular sort of exam where they have you read lines of increasingly small letters and numbers one eye at a time and have you follow a moving object with your eyes while holding your head still. They also put drops into my eye to enlarge my pupils so a sort of telescope machine can look deep into the eye to see the retina and optic nerve and various blood vessels, checking to see if there are any abnormalities. A part of that telescope apparatus usage is to have the patient stop blinking long enough for the telescope thing to have a good look. So they tell you to stop blinking; you know what that does, don't you? It makes it almost impossible to stop blinking. At least, it makes it almost impossible to not think about not blinking. So there I was, thinking about not blinking and realizing that as I was thinking about not blinking I had blinked, but then resolving

myself to do better I then hear the attendant say again, "stop blinking" which made me blink again....you get the picture. I thought I had made kind of a mess of things at the end of it, when I asked the attendant how other people do with stopping their blinking; she matter-of-factly said "it doesn't come easy to anyone; it's an autonomic response we almost never have to think about, and when we do, it's disruptive."

She used one of my favorite words when thinking about the kind of love God asks us to share - autonomic. I've talked with you before about that word, for I think in its meaning we get closer to the style of loving Jesus represented. God invites us to nurture an autonomic love in our lives, an automatic, spontaneous, authentic love that saturates our being so naturally as to become spiritually instinctual, as to become a part of our being practiced so consistently that we don't have to think about it - to automatically, instinctually love those who are around us as we love God.

Or maybe there's a bit more to it - could it be that in order to see God, to sense God, to feel God, we need to practice the kind of love God practices? Scripture proclaims that God is love, perhaps best expressed in I John 4:7-8. "Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love." That's pretty conclusive, isn't it? If God is known not by sight or logic, but in and through loving each other, then wherever our love falters, so does our awareness of God; and conversely, wherever our love aligns with God's love, it aligns us with God himself; it allows us to experience God in action.

You might have heard this point made by William Blake in a very short poem he wrote back in the early 1800's: "I sought my soul, but my soul I could not see; I sought my God, but my God eluded me; I sought my neighbor, and I found all three." It's a truth at the heart of the great commandment, one that is as challenging as it is clear: to love as God loves is to know God; to love as God loves is to love each other without condition, without hesitation, without limit - to love autonomically, as God does with us.

But we must keep in mind one thing above all: that talking about and thinking over and believing in this love does not show us God; it is the love put into action, the love made alive in our engagements and efforts, that enables one to see God. I thought of this recently when I saw one of those custom license plates on a car in Michael's parking lot - I think they call them vanity plates? Anyway, this particular license read "4 JESUS." Can I just say something that might get me

into trouble with someone here? THAT KIND OF MESSAGING DRIVES ME A LITTLE CRAZY, for I feel like it tends to belittle the Gospel, that it reflects the all-too-American tendency to reduce truth to catchphrases or witty statements. My main tension with such statements is that THEY ARE SO EASY TO MAKE - AND I FEAR THAT THEY TEND TO LEAVE THINGS THERE with a warm-fuzzy glow and no real outpouring towards others. God's love can never be reduced to a slogan; God cannot be seen or understood through a catchphrase. If we are for Jesus, we must be for the love of God enacted in real life, made as tangible and relevant and practical as we possibly can. To put it another way: the love of God is made visible in actions; The love of God may look like sandwiches made on a Saturday morning, or wheeling the cardboard recycling cart out to the parking lot, or delivering a casserole dinner to a mournful family, or going with one of our recent immigrants to get her driver's license, or tending the beautiful flowers surrounding our building, or creating our prayer lists for the week, or restoring a neighbor's garbage container when it blows over, or sitting as a friend of the court for a young person facing the judge, or standing before the legislature in opposition to a bill targeting LGBTQ individuals, or bringing music into a care facility setting. THESE ARE THE THINGS I HAVE WITNESSED IN YOU, OUR CONGREGATION, AS YOU GO ABOUT THE LOVE OF GOD; I believe you do these things because in their doing you have discovered a glimpse of God, and realize you are helping others to do the same.

Do you want to see God? Love others. Do you want to know God? Love others. Do you want to feel the presence of God? Love others. Love them as they are; love them beyond reason; love them as they need to be loved, not as you'd like to love; love them beyond emotion, beyond convenience, beyond the comfort we all crave so much. Love them as God loves us all. God will be found in our loving.