Sermon

Matthew 22:34-46

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" 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.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

---Matthew 22:34-46---

Love God, and love your neighbor as yourself. As Christians, we’ve heard that message so often, that I wonder how much we really think about it. It probably doesn’t sound radical or unrealistic to our ears. What if you looked at it his way?

A man was working on a crossword puzzle and asked, "What’s a four-letter word for a strong emotional reaction toward a difficult person?" Someone listening said, "The answer is hate." Someone else exclaimed, "No, wait, the answer is love!" A four-letter word for a strong emotional reaction toward a difficult person… What if everyone is working that same crossword puzzle throughout life, and the way you answer is up to you?1 Every time someone is difficult, you have a choice between responding with contempt or concern. What would Jesus suggest?

In this passage, when Jesus linked loving God with loving one’s neighbor, he made some important people very uncomfortable.

According to Matthew’s Gospel, this was the final confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees before plans for his permanent removal were put in motion. We tend to think of the Pharisees as bad people, but they were respected by others, because they tried to understand and obey all 613 laws in the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament.

For some time, this group of Pharisees had been trying to catch Jesus in a moment of false interpretation or blasphemy. They thought they had cornered Jesus this time, as one of them asked an impossible question: Which of all those laws in the Bible is the most important? Whatever he chose would allow them to condemn him for devaluing the other laws!

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No matter. Jesus seized the opportunity to boil down all the law and the prophets to two commandments: Two similar commandments, he said.

The first commandment was and is known by every Jewish person. It’s part of a passage in Deuteronomy, the Shema: Hear, O Israel: The LORD your God, the LORD is one. You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. The passage instructs the faithful to “write these words on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

You’ve seen mezuzahs on the doorways of Jewish homes. The small tubes contain a scroll of Hebrew scripture with these words.

Jesus coupled this well-regarded law with a second, relatively obscure commandment in Leviticus (19:18b): “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” It would have seemed like a surprising combination to the Pharisees. And for Jesus to claim the authority to sat that all the law and prophets rest on these would have left them speechless.

We usually understand this second commandment, love your neighbor as yourself, to mean that you should love others as much as you love yourself. But it also means that you must love your neighbor, because every person stands in relation with God just as you do. Love your neighbor, as God’s beloved creation, one as beloved as you.

Love God and love what God loves. Okay, is that so hard?

Well, try on this Mark Twain statement: "It's not what I don't understand in the Bible that bothers me; it's what I do understand that’s the trouble."

Love God and love your neighbor. It’s so basic to Christian commitment, that some people visualize this law of love in the shape of a cross. The vertical post is the love between God and us. The horizontal crossbeam is the love that connects us and other people. At the center of this love is Christ, God’s love that became human and loved us on our level. (sign cross) Jesus’ life embodied God’s law of love.
But, can love be a law? How can we be commanded to love? If you make yourself love someone, wouldn’t that be faking it?

You know by now, that the kind of love Jesus talked about is not an emotion; it’s a choice. Really, it’s a choice—a commitment.

It’s a choice to make love a way of living, more than a way of feeling.

It’s not a matter of sentiment, it’s a matter of the will. And as with everything concerning the will, on our own, it’s hard for us to stick with it. We become distracted and selfish, even in loving. It takes the grace of God to call us back from being petty, and to reorient us to the main thing. So that we can refocus on a love that faces outward and not inward.

God’s love can inspire you to look for, and respond, to someone else’s need, not so that the other person will be grateful, or will love you back. Inspired love sees the other person, just because God loves that person.

I know that people get hung up on whether they’ve have acted with pure motives. If you worry too much about your motives, you might be afraid to do the good that God’s inspiring in you. No one but God loves perfectly, but because God loves us, we can love, even in our own imperfect way.

C.S. Lewis wrote, "Do not waste your time bothering with whether you 'love' your neighbor — act as if you do. As soon as we do this, we find one of the great secrets. When you are behaving as if you love someone, you will presently come to love him. If you injure someone you dislike, you will find yourself disliking him more. If you do him a good turn, you will find yourself disliking him less."²

It’s really hard to show love when you don’t feel it—to help someone who has hurt or ignored you.

² Mere Christianity
Christian activist Dorothy Day3 wrote something that’s a difficult truth: "Your love for God is only as great as the love you have for the person you love the least." Oh, that’s hard! When I’m offended by someone, I hate thinking that my distain for that person limits my love for God. That really hurts my heart. "Your love for God is only as great as the love you have for the person you love the least."

A newspaper columnist and minister, George Crane, told of a wife who came to his office full of hatred toward her husband. "I want not only to get rid of him, I want to get even. Before I divorce him, I want to hurt him as much as he has hurt me."

Dr. Crane suggested an ingenious plan "Go home and act as if you really love your husband. Tell him how much he means to you. Praise him for every decent trait. Go out of your way to be as kind and generous as possible. Spare no efforts to please him, to enjoy him."

"After you've convinced him of your undying love, then drop the bomb. Tell him that you're getting a divorce. That will really hurt."

With a glint in her eye, she smiled and exclaimed, "Beautiful, beautiful. Will he ever be surprised!" And she did it with enthusiasm: acting as if she loved him. For two months straight, she showed kindness by listening, giving, encouraging, sharing. When Dr. Crane noticed that he hadn’t seen her in a long time, he called her. "Are you ready to go through with the divorce?" "Divorce?" she exclaimed. "No way! I really do love him, after all." Her loving actions changed how she felt.4

You might think it’s insincere to act as though you like someone, when you don’t. Try it, anyway. I’m not suggesting that you allow yourself to be bullied and abused. Just try to be generous with your judgment.

Try to view the other person’s actions as innocent, or benign, instead of jumping to the conclusion that something was meant as a criticism or an offence. Give someone a free pass when they behave badly. Cut someone a break, when they mess up. Do it just because God likes that person.

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3 Dorothy Day founded the Catholic Worker Movement in the 1930s
4 J. Allan Petersen
Tell yourself that “any friend of God is a friend of mine. If God can love her, then I can try to be patient.”

In time, you might actually feel a sense of affection that started out as an act. Fake it till you make it, in other words. But even if you never feel fond of that person, you can continue to choose to love through your actions.

That’s loving your neighbor as yourself. Try to love what God loves. That’s a real world way of loving God. Love God with all your heart and soul and mind, and love your neighbor. Jesus connected these two. ([sign of the cross])