

## **“Is Love Enough?”**

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*First Presbyterian Church, Pulaski, TN*

### **FIRST READING: Deuteronomy 34:1-12**

Then Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar. The Lord said to him, “This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, ‘I will give it to your descendants’; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.”

Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigor had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses. Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

### **SECOND READING: Matthew 22:34-46**

When the Pharisees heard that he 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.

We have two fascinating texts in front of us, both of which bring us to the end of a prophetic career. Moses dies by the command of God in Deuteronomy 34, and in Matthew, Jesus essentially ends his public ministry. From now on, the life and the death of the prophet will be in God’s hands alone.

So, it is intriguing that in the Matthew passage the all but final conversation that Jesus has in his ministry is with the Pharisees—and they raise the issue that is the central issue:

**“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”**

It could seemingly be just something of another routine theological question, one that we can all answer ourselves. Quick quiz: “What is the greatest commandment?” As disciples of Jesus, we already know the answer. “Love God and Love Neighbor. Next question.” In fact, it is all too easy to move on to the “next question,” quickly dismissing what Jesus said at the end: “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” In other words, not only are these the first two greatest commandments, everything that we ever envision doing is to flow from these two. There are no 3 and 4, where we can go to find something more “practical” or more “relevant.”

No, these two are really all the commandments, and if any commandment is pursued in its own light alone, we may be abusing the commandment, even as we think we are fulfilling it.

In fact, that is precisely what the Pharisees are doing. They are quoting or calling on the law for very unloving reasons, both un-loving toward God and toward Jesus, who, whatever they may think of him, he does remain their neighbor at least.

But what I want to look at this morning is the fact that Jesus quotes these two commandments under duress, under the threat of death, no less. I have preached when I thought people were bored, confused, frustrated, tired, sad, sleepy, happy or grumpy. But I have never preached when my life was on the line and people wanted to kill me.

I don't know about you, but I think that is a fairly significant distraction.

And yet, Jesus gives the same answer he has given at other times. The answer is, in its shortest form, love. Love of God and love of neighbor.

Yesterday Emma and I went to Birmingham for the funeral of a friend. I was to speak at the funeral, so I was feeling some pressure about what to say, how to say it and how to relate to people. I found those to be both essential parts of the day, but they were also distractions from simply saying as best I could what I believed God had done through the life of this dear woman and to give thanks to God for her life.

But as the morning started, Emma and I had set up a full schedule, only to have it all interrupted by the fact that there was a major accident on I-65 South near Cullman. And traffic crawled. And as the traffic crawled, my blood pressure rose and my patience fell. Even though human beings had been injured in an accident, all I could think of was how much longer this was going to take. In fact, it wasn't until I caught sight of the wreckage that it really hit me that there were people going through far more than I was, and that God would be more concerned about them than about my schedule. I finally managed to offer a prayer for the people hurt (or worse) in that horrific accident.

But by the time I got to the funeral home, my distractions had returned. Trying to think through what I would say, and then meeting all the people who I had not seen in a while, reconnecting with all their stories and trying to recover a little sense of my Birmingham relationships. I couldn't help but think about how people seemed to relate to me and what they thought of me.

So, once again I had to try to come home to why I was there and what I was there to do.

Then on the way home, trying to think through this sermon about love, I endured one distraction after another on the road back.

It started with getting off at Walker's Chapel Road to go into Best Buy for a quick purchase, I hoped. But the prices seemed high, and I felt a little pressured by the sales person, so I left. I tried Target next, but every salesperson I tried to ask a question seemed to be pre-trained to turn and walk directly away from me once I got within 20 feet. I threw up my hands and left the store, ready to get home to Tennessee.

But, of course, getting back to I-65 was virtually impossible, as was getting in and out of a Chik-Fil-A when we decided we might need to eat before we lost our lives or our patience in that shopping area. I was ready to snap at the sound of a butterfly wings' flapping.

You might think that finally getting back onto the interstate would have at least been progress, and it might have been, except for a person in the left lane who, as you approached, would slow down to 45 or so, and tempt you to pass on the right. To keep you from staying behind him in the left hand lane, he would make things a little more exciting by turning on his right turn signal, just to keep you guessing. So, the trap was set either way, but finally the clear option was to pass on the right. The second you did that, however, you realized that you had been baited into a drag race, with the finish line being the rear bumper of the next car ahead in the lane you just entered. I came up behind the car and fell into the trap. At 90, Emma told me I had to back off.

I never was so glad as to see the new Tennessee welcome center just across the state line. We had to stop there just to recover.

And that was yesterday, so when I woke up this morning, I had to think about what it would mean to preach a sermon on "Love the Lord your God, and love your neighbor."

So, the final preparation for this sermon was when I arrived at the church this morning and found that there were things left from the events the day before here in our church. And I had to swallow hard and breathe deeply, do some cleanup work and then try, try to put my mind back on "Love God and love neighbor."

All those were aggravations and distractions, but none of them rose to the level of someone wanting to kill me.

But in the midst of one aggravating, distracting and lethal discussion after another with the religious leaders of the day, Jesus is pressed at the very end to answer the question, “What is the first and greatest commandment?”

If it had been me, looking at those people glaring at me, not really wanting to hear anything but something they can tear apart and build into a death penalty case against me, I am pretty sure I would have answered,

“Thou shalt not kill!” “How about that one, guys?”

“Or, thou shalt not bear false witness against your neighbor? How are you feeling about that one today?”

Jesus knows in this situation that no matter what commandment he picks out of what is generally considered to be 613 commandments in the Old Testament—23 pages in this printout I have with me today—whatever he picks will not matter to them. It will be what commandments he doesn’t pick.

If he says, “Do not kill,” then they will say, “So, you see no value in the Sabbath, is that it?” “Or circumcision? Or the temple sacrifices?”

These are people, who just as there is a temptation to do today, looked for the most obscure rules or the most detailed information as a way of making it seem as if they cared more than everyone else.

So knowing which letter of the book of Isaiah and what importance that letter must have had because it was the first letter of an equally important word...well, all that showed who was really pious and who wasn’t.

And somehow the more obscure the more holiness it must have taken to have found it and recognized it.

When the truth is that it really is what are the obvious commands that matter most, but we want to obey the least.

‘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.”

Some scary part of me wants to say, “well, of course, those are the two great commandments, but no one can do those anyway, so let’s move on to something we can do.”

Or some part of me wants to best these hyenas at their own game and pull up some command that they would have to admit they didn’t even know existed, or put some novel interpretation on a commandment so they would have to admit that I am the Messiah, if I am Jesus.

But, thanks be to God and in mercy for all of you, God did not make me the Messiah, and I am decidedly not Jesus.

I struggle to obey the first and greatest commandment on days when the worst I face is bad driving, a delayed schedule and immature drivers.

Here in his last public appearances, Jesus faces his most vicious critics and opponents and when asked what is the great commandment, answers with words virtually an echo of the first public sermon he ever preached. It was love then, and it is love now. Love is always enough. It is always the right thing to do.

Indeed, it is always the first and greatest thing we can do in any situation, including when people are out to do you in or kill you. That is the marvel of Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God.

And I marvel even more at these next words, because Jesus doesn’t have to speak them at all. He can stop with loving God, and more or less cling to those words, not bothering with the rest. He could give himself a free pass on loving his neighbor at the very moment his neighbors are plotting to kill him. But he doesn’t take the free pass.

And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’

There is a case we could make that Jesus adds those words to the original question precisely to sting the Pharisees with the truth of what they were doing: trying to assassinate a neighbor, certainly not love one.

And that may be the best explanation.

But I think the simplest answer may also be right. Jesus was as committed to love of God and neighbor at the end of his ministry as much as at the start. And nothing that has happened or will happen will or can change that.

Love that has never been tested may not really be love—not yet, anyway.

Love that has faced no threats, felt no heat of adversity or rejection...love that has never found it walking with the wind in its face is probably no love, either. Not yet.

Love that hasn't tried and been tried, love that not faced adversity and temptation, love that has not been pressed to give up or to break down, love that has not fought for something good and loving, and yet lost, this may not yet be love.

Love is far more than a polite wish. Love is anything but a selfish power.

Love faces life, as it really is, and meets life in the power of God's own love. Love is the redemptive will of God that seeks to redeem and reconcile human beings, as God's creatures, back to God. If God sought to find ways to be distracted from the ways of love, God wouldn't have to look far. We human beings create not just distractions from God's ways of love, we are out and out obstacles.

God has as much reason, as Jesus did that day in Jerusalem, to opt out of love and make anything else the reason for that day, including vengeance or destruction.

But Jesus chose love again, as the first and highest call on his life, and if anyone wonders if Jesus meant it when he said, "Love your enemies," here is Jesus practicing it.

This is how Jesus began his ministry, and it is how he ends it. Jesus knew what the obstacles were before he started out in Galilee, and here in Jerusalem he has faced them again and again. But still his mind, his will, his heart, his strength, his soul are all stayed on God, and on loving others.

This is the highest calling there is, and in loving, in each moment of our lives, not just when someone asks us which are the greatest commands, we live into the salvation of God and spread it. For Jesus, the first commandment in his words is also the first commandment in his heart. And the second is like it.

Moses dies by the command of the Lord. It is true he does not reach the Promised Land.

But Moses has lived his life loving God and loving the people he was called to love and serve. Geography really has little to say in all that. It is the geography of the human heart, the human mind, the human soul, the human will and the human strength to live.

Moses himself broke one of God's commands, and he does not enter the land of Canaan. But Moses has long since entered the Land of Promise toward which we all are journeying, the land in which love of God and love of neighbor reign supreme, and nothing, not anything can distract or stop it.

Today, I found myself ready to delay love and move it down the list of my priorities below my own ideas of what was important. Some of those things were good things. But many were just my own selfish wants masquerading as "commandments." There was actually nothing commanding me except the call to love, and that is never a harsh command. Far-reaching maybe, but harsh never.

So, today, remember this, and help me remember it, too.

The most important thing we can do in any circumstance regardless of who or what we see in front of us is indeed to love.

Thanks be to God, this is the Good News. God looks at us, and loves us with all of God's heart, mind, soul and strength, and in Jesus God loves us even more than Jesus as God's love incarnate loves his own life. This is truly amazing love. Let us love God and others, with all the love we possibly can. For no matter how much we may doubt it, by God's grace and Spirit, love is always enough.

Amen.