

Sermon: Matthew 22: 34-40

For Jean, With Love

“The Greatest Commandment”

October 23, 2011

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How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.
I love thee to the level of everyday's
Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
I love thee freely, as men strive for Right;
I love thee purely, as they turn from Praise.
I love thee with a passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints, --- I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! --- and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

This poem by Elizabeth Barret Browning was first published in 1850. It is sonnet 43 from “Sonnets from the Portuguese” which she wrote in the 1840’s as love sonnets to her husband-to-be, Robert Browning. It is the most famous of the “Sonnets from the Portuguese,” and one of the best known love poems in the English language.

"Sonnet 43" expresses the poet's intense love for her betrothed. So intense is her love for him, she says, that it rises to the spiritual level, as when she says:

“My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.”

Being and Grace are capitalized as if of the Divine. She loves him freely, without coercion; she loves him purely, without expectation of personal gain. She even loves him with an intensity of the suffering (passion: Line 9) resembling that of Christ on the cross, and she loves him in the way that she loved saints as a child. Moreover, she expects to continue to love him after death.

She expresses through her words the eternal nature of love and its power to overcome everything, including death. The sonnet begins with a question “How do I love thee?” The remainder of the sonnet serves as an answer as the author “counts the ways.” The repetition of “I love thee” serves as a constant reminder, however it is the depth of love that gives the poem its power: “To the depth and breadth and height my soul can reach.” It is a beautiful example of the expression of one being’s love for another. But there is also a spiritual quality about it I believe, don’t you? (She mentions her soul, Being and Grace, Praise, passion, faith, saints and God.) If you substituted You, with a capital Y for God at the end of the sonnet, this could be a love poem to God. The love she speaks of does have a Divine quality about it. And that is what we are here to talk about this morning. Love. Love for God and love for one another.

Like Browning’s sonnet, our scripture lesson today also begins with a question, and the rest of it serves as the answer.

Allow me to put this question and event into context, by giving you a little background. This is Holy Week in Jerusalem. Remember PJ’s friend, the little Palm Sunday donkey? She carried Jesus into the Holy City earlier in the

week in that triumphal parade, with the people waving palms and shouting “Hosanna!” There are feasts and celebrations going on. Crowds have proclaimed Jesus the “Son of David” hailing him as the promised Messiah. Also, Jesus has been busy this week, visiting the temple and teaching all who would listen through his parables. Roaming around you have the chief priests who are the Sadducees. They are in charge of worship at the temple in Jerusalem; you also have the Pharisees who are the Jewish scholars of the day, “teachers of the law” as some called them. They taught in synagogues, and were religious examples in the eyes of the people and self-appointed guardians of the law and its proper observance. Folks, we are not talking about law as we know it in our everyday lives. We are talking religious law here, Jewish Torah Law, what we call the Old Testament. They are professionally trained in the development, teaching and application of Old Testament Law. Their authority was strictly human (i.e. Not Divine, not of God) and based on tradition.

Most of Matthew 22 has different “experts” trying to trap Jesus with questions so they can get rid of him. The clever questioners are Sadducees and Pharisees. Both groups want to discredit Jesus. The Sadducees are particularly concerned that Jesus will stir up unrest and cause the Romans to intervene with force. The Pharisees are concerned that Jesus will draw people away from their interpretations of the teachings of the Torah. Usually these two groups, Sadducees and Pharisees, are somewhat at odds with one another. But for the moment they are united in their opposition to Jesus.

The Sadducees and Pharisees genuinely think Jesus is dangerous. They want to unmask him as a pretender, an imposter, as the threat to the nation and to the faith that they

believe him to be. They are disturbed by his following and want to bring him down, which they could do in a variety of ways. They could get Jesus to say something that makes it seem as though he does not know or respect the traditions of their ancestors; or they could get him to say something that sounds as though he supports the Roman military occupation of Israel, which would alienate his followers; or they could get him to speak treason against Rome. Any of these things would help their cause. They want Jesus to condemn himself with his own words, to give them a pretext to do away with him. They make several runs at it in Matthew 22 by asking questions of Jesus in order to trick and trap him. But Jesus isn't Jesus for nothing! They get nowhere. Jesus' answers are so amazing that all the questioners can do is walk away shaking their heads and His followers are even more astonished at his teaching! Then we come to our scripture lesson, vs. 34-40. The Pharisees are going to take one more crack at stumping Jesus. This particular Pharisee begins this conversation with a question to Jesus. Don't forget, an expert in the law is asking the question. And we all know how those lawyers are always trying to stir up trouble!

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" This so-called "expert" in the law is really mocking Jesus by addressing him as "Teacher." The Pharisees do not acknowledge his authority to teach them, nor do they expect a meaningful answer. And why not? Because it was the Pharisees and their ancestors who, through the study of scripture, had taken the original 10 commandments and sliced, diced and chopped them up into 613 different rules, or commandments of their own making. I mean they really split hairs. There is one commandment that forbade boiling a calf in its mother's milk. They figured that whatever Jesus answered would have to contradict at least one or more of

the 612 remaining commandments! In their minds it was a no-win situation for Jesus. But Jesus not only knew the only way to avoid their trap, He also knew exactly what they needed to hear. And he answers without hesitation or calculation and from a place deep in his heart:

“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.”

Jesus gives two commandments, because he is telling us that you cannot fulfill one without fulfilling the other. Jesus tells us that the answer is Love. Love for God and Love for other people. What the Son of God has done is summarized the 10 Commandments into two statements. He quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind.” And from Leviticus 19:18: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” And then he tells the Pharisee, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.” Law and Prophets are capitalized, because fyi, “the Law and the Prophets” was another way of saying the Torah (what non-Jews now call the Old Testament)! Jesus tells the Torah “expert” that the whole of the Torah is based on these two commandments! Ha! Take that you Pharisee! Isn’t that what Jesus’ whole short life has been about? Love? Teaching Love? Loving God and each other? Who is the expert now? If you look at the 10 Commandments, the first 3 are about loving God, and the last 7 are regarding our neighbor, perfectly summed up as “love your neighbor as yourself.” So Jesus has hit the proverbial nail on the head. He tells the Pharisee, well, pal, in a nutshell, the Greatest

Commandment is Love God, and next is Love your neighbor. Because you can't have one without the other.

The word for "love" that is used in this context is the greek word "agape." It is the same word for the love we are to have for God, and the same word which the New Testament always uses for the love which God has for us. It is not specifically a love of emotion or warm, butterflies in our stomach kind of feelings. It is not our traditional, everyday idea of love. It is not the same love that Elizabeth Barret Browning is expressing to her fiancé. It is so much more than that. It is a love of commitment, and of intelligence, and of will. It is the sort of love one must exercise if one is going to love God. It is also the only kind of love that makes sense if you truly love your neighbor. Jesus isn't exhorting us to have a friendly cup of coffee and some friendly conversation with our neighbor, although that can be lovely. He's not even talking about our "neighbor" as the person next door (although it could be). He is not commanding us to "feel good" about each other. What sense would that make for imperfect human beings? It is not about emotions. Does it make sense to make a command out of warm thoughts? God is commanding an over-riding concern for our fellow human being, for his or her welfare both in this life and for everlasting life. We are to care about one another as much as we care about ourselves.

Can you just imagine if we actually did? The world would work so much better. There would be no hunger, because we wouldn't rest until our neighbors had something to eat, too. There would be no war, because we could not imagine doing to our neighbor anything we would not want done to us. The lawyers would be put out of business because how could we sue one another? Instead, we would seek the most equitable solutions to our disputes. No one would have to tell

us what was right, because we would be concerned that our neighbors came out of any situation as well as we would like to.

Cheating would be impossible, since we would not want our neighbor to suffer the disadvantage. Gloating in victory would evaporate because we want our neighbor to feel as good about the competition as we do.

Could you imagine this next presidential primary and election in such a world? There would be no negative ads. The deceit, and dirty tricks, and hidden agendas of modern politics simply would find no place to get a foothold in such a world. And our entire purpose for being would be to live out the love we have for God by living out love for one another. It would be heavenly - and it may well be what heaven will be like for those who go there.

But we don't live in a world of agape love. We live in an imperfect world, populated by imperfect people. But Jesus wants us to love God in such a way that we put His will first in what we do, and think, and say, and we do that best by living as though we were in that world where our neighbor is just as important to us as we are - BECAUSE IN GOD'S EYES, HE OR SHE IS.

The Rev. David Ruhe from Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ in Des Moines, Iowa puts it this way:
Quote,

“Let’s be clear: love in this context does not mean warm, fuzzy feelings. That is sentimentality. Love is an act of the will. Love, in Frederick Buechner’s concise definition, is “the deliberate seeking of the well-being of another, even at the expense of self.” This is the kind of love that Jesus taught. It is the kind of love He lived. It is the kind of love to which He calls us as His followers, because this kind of love is the

clearest and truest revelation of the nature of God. It is absolutely central to our faith. If someone who had never heard of Christianity asked me what our faith is about, this is precisely where I would begin my answer.” End quote.

Jesus wants us to follow “The Greatest Commandment” ‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind’ by living a life that manifests that agape love, with our actions, words thoughts and deeds. And if we do that, then loving our neighbor in the same way follows naturally. Because you cannot have one without the other. God not only tells us to love our neighbor but He re-shapes our hearts to make it possible. These two loves go hand-in-hand. Love of God and love of neighbor. We can’t love our fellow human beings without first loving God, and we can’t really show our love for God without showing love to our neighbor. Remember Jesus’ words in Matthew 25 vs. 40: ‘Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.’

Is it easy? NO! Can we do it unflinching? Absolutely not! We’re human, we make mistakes. Walking in Jesus’ footsteps is a constant struggle. But the struggle is the whole point. We have to keep trying. Even the most God-like of us falls down occasionally – because no human is perfect! But Jesus wants us to try and keep trying. I’m not a Miley Cyrus fan, but her song “The Climb” came to mind when I was writing this.

“There's always gonna be another mountain.

I'm always gonna wanna make it move.

Always gonna be an uphill battle.

Sometimes I'm gonna have to lose.

Ain't about how fast I get there, ain't about what's waitin' on the other side.

It's the climb.

Keep on moving, keep climbing, keep the faith. It's all about the climb. Keep your faith.”

We as a church family and a community have lost someone we dearly loved, our purple, sparkly girl. But what she left behind can never be lost, because Jean loved God and loved other people – even when they were hard to love. And she taught all of us and everyone who knew her to love God and love our neighbor. And she didn't do it just through words, up here in the pulpit, in a black robe. She taught us by example, by the way she lived her life, through her actions and deeds. She taught us at the gym on her spinning cycle, in an exercise class, she taught us over lunch, in the women's group, she taught us in church meetings and at the dinner table. Did she ever falter? Of course, she was human just like the rest of us. I believe that Jean's greatest lesson and legacy to me, to all of us who were lucky enough to be a part of her life, is the Greatest Commandment and that which follows it: " 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' " "And you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Because you can't have one without the other.

Jean told me a story shortly before her stroke. She was talking about Maria, the woman at chemo. If you recall Maria was in despair and Jean had promised her a wig because she felt it would make Maria feel better about herself and her situation. The last time Jean saw Maria at chemo, they were talking and of course Jean was being a

cheerleader. She told Maria that she was going to get a wig, put on some make-up and take her slippers off and put on some shoes! Maria told Jean (and I am paraphrasing here) how inspirational Jean was, how much she had helped her, she told Jean that she saved her life, and gave her hope. And I remember what Jean told Maria, she said that she was "God's vessel," (that is a direct quote) **she** didn't do any of this for Maria, God did it for Maria through Jean. God was working through Jean to help Maria. And that is what Pastor Jean was, she was God's vessel on earth through which his love was poured out and through which we learned the Greatest Commandment.

Jean was my pastor, but more importantly she was my friend. And my life since I met her 11 years ago, has never been the same. And whatever is left of my earthly life, will never be the same for knowing and loving Jean; and for being known and loved by Jean. How do I love thee, let me count the ways....Browning's words sum up beautifully how many of us felt about Jean Russo-Parks. When I think of my faith journey, I think of it in terms of "before Jean" and "after Jean." My beloved friend, has been the single most important influence in my life of faith. Knowing and loving Jean, and being known and loved by Jean has made me a better person and for that and so much more I will be eternally grateful to Jean and give thanks always to God. Rev. John Bedingfield says so eloquently in his sermon "Loving God With All Our Parts," "We have all known people in our lives whom we believed to be especially Godly. These are the people who make you a better person by being in your life. Or at least they're the ones who make your day better, simply by talking to you. Truly Godly people are the ones who make a difference everywhere they go. They always seem to be in the right place at the right time and doing the very thing that is most needed at any given time.

And the difference between such Godly folks and everyone else, I submit to you, is that Godly people love God with all their hearts, and souls and minds.”

I do believe Jean was Godly; and she absolutely made me a better person by being in my life. I suspect many of us here today feel that way. Jean did make a difference wherever she went, and she was always doing the very thing that was most needed at certain times. Jean loved God with all her heart, and all her soul and all her mind; and she loved us too.

Let's forget for a moment that Elizabeth Barret Browning wrote sonnet 43 for her husband-to-be. Let's imagine we are hearing it for the first time and know nothing about it's history. Let's imagine.....

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Most quiet need, by sun and candle-light.
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I love thee with a passion put to use
In my old griefs, and with my childhood's faith.
I love thee with a love I seemed to lose
With my lost saints, --- I love thee with the breath,
Smiles, tears, of all my life! --- and, if God choose,
I shall but love thee better after death.

For Jean, with Love. Let us pray: Dear God, We know as Jean so often said, with You all things are possible. Help us to be Your hands and feet in this world. We are imperfect

humans, we need Your help and Your guidance so that we can love our neighbor as ourselves, thereby loving You with all of our heart, soul and mind. The two cannot exist separately. Walk with us in our journey, help us up when we fall down, show us The Way. Amen.