

**Wesley United Methodist Church**  
**October 25, 2020**

Scripture: 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

The Main Thing

In the traditional town-hall forum for a political candidate, someone from the audience asks a question. The motivation behind the question varies. Sometimes to challenge, test, or trap the candidate. Sometimes to get more information. Sometimes to learn more about the candidate, who they are, what they believe and what they stand for.

In our gospel reading today, Jesus is facing the 1<sup>st</sup> century version of the town hall. Over the course of a few days the Sadducees and Pharisees, two of the major groups among the Jews, came to Jesus to ask him questions. They asked questions about paying taxes, what happened after death, and now a lawyer, speaking for the Pharisees, asked, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Commentators and theologians differ about the motivation for this question and the others that were asked. Many believe that both groups were opposed to Jesus and were trying to trick him. They were trying to make him look ridiculous, or uninformed, or incompetent – anything to try to turn the crowds away from him or find something that they could charge him with in their courts. There were 613 laws in their scriptures. How would he respond and how could they use his response to their advantage?

Other religious scholars are quick to point out that this kind of debate was common among religious leaders. Many rabbis had already answered this question or one very similar to it, trying to simplify the laws for the average person to be able to follow.

Motivation aside, the question was asked, and Jesus gave his response. Jesus pointed to the main thing. First, he quoted part of the Shema, verses found in the book of Deuteronomy that Jews were to recite two times a day. Let me share these words from Deuteronomy that give us a good indication of how important these words were.

“Hear O Israel. Our God is the Lord! Only the Lord! Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your being and all your strength. These words that I am commanding you today must always be on your minds. Recite them to your children. Talk about

them when you are sitting around your house and when you are out and about, when you are lying down and when you are getting up. Tie them on your hand as a sign. They should be on your forehead as a symbol. Write them on your house's doorframes and on your city's gates.”<sup>i</sup>

Clearly this was widely understood as a main part of Judaism, something to be part of everything you did. During Jesus' day, they lived in a world where people believed there were many “gods” so their understanding, belief, and assertion that there is only one God set the Jewish people apart from the culture around them. We may take that for granted today, but we best not take it lightly.

Notice that Jesus focused on the part of loving that one God with every part of your being. It would be a good idea for us to look at our own lives and ask if we really do love God with all our heart, being and strength, or do we reserve our love for other things that then become our gods.

But before we get too focused on how we love God, Jesus immediately adds that there is a second commandment that is like the first. He's not saying that it is similar to the first. He's not saying that it comes after the first. He is saying that it is an essential part of the first. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” You can't have one without the other. As Jesus says, all of the law and prophets hang on these two commandments.

By the way, this wasn't original to Jesus either. Again, he is quoting the law, this time from the book of Leviticus.<sup>ii</sup> It's in a section about how to treat other people. It reminds them not to seek revenge or hold a grudge but to love their neighbor as they love themselves.

In Luke's gospel, when Jesus answers this question, the person asking him, then follows up by asking “Who is my neighbor?” In other words, “who are the people I need to love”, or “who can I not love”. At that point Jesus tells the wonderful story of the “Good Samaritan” showing that the least likely one is the neighbor. It's not unusual for us humans to want to try to limit our response. There are some people I just don't want to love so give me my out – who is included in this and who is excluded? Jesus makes it clear that no one is excluded.

Again, this is not new to Jesus. He is well grounded in his understanding of the law. In Leviticus where we find the law to love our neighbor as yourself, we find an additional reminder of this when the law speaks about immigrants. Hear the words from Leviticus 19:33-34: “When immigrants live in your land with you, you must not cheat them. Any immigrant who lives with you must be treated as if they were one of your citizens. You must love them as yourself because you were immigrants in the land of Egypt.” In other words, treat others the way you would want to be treated in similar circumstances.

Jesus knew his scripture. He knew the law and he gave the Pharisees an answer citing the laws. But he focuses on the main thing – on love – without which the laws become meaningless. He insists that all the laws and all the words of the prophets hang on this most important principle of loving God and loving others as much as we love ourselves. Without love, the laws become meaningless, and even dangerous.

The Upper Room Disciplines meditation on this passage says it nicely. “The implication of his reminder that Love is the first and greatest commandment disrupts their governing misapprehension that the law is what saves us. Love trumps law, Jesus insists. It doesn’t discount it, but it overrules it. Where law divides, love unites. Where law assigns priority, love equalizes. Where law excludes, love includes. Where law mires in argument, love fosters gratitude and generous discernment. Where law leads to guilt, shame, and judgment of self and others, love leads to forgiveness and repentance – relational and rooted in trust.”<sup>iii</sup>

For Jesus it doesn’t get more basic than that. Love God and Love your neighbor. They not only go hand in hand, but they are also part of each other. You can’t have one without the other.

Love, here, is not some warm fuzzy feeling. Love is action. Love is thinking of the good of all and acting upon it, not just asking what I want, what is best for me, but asking what is best for everyone. Let me give you one very small example. While I was thinking about what I would be saying in this sermon, I received a phone call telling me that a grandchild I had just been with was now considered a close contact of a classmate who had tested positive for Covid 19. In theory I did not need to quarantine

because my grandchild was not the one who had Covid. However, my plans for Saturday included driving out of state to attend a birthday party for another grandchild. It also included being in a car for four hours with a person who has some serious health risks.

The likelihood was that I was not really a risk to others, but I made the difficult decision to not attend the party because I did not want to take even that small risk of exposing anyone else. There are many times, I am sure when I don't make the best decisions, but this seemed like one of those times when I couldn't talk about loving others in the same way that I would love myself and then act in a way that seemed to contradict that.

We see this debate all the time. We wear masks not only to protect ourselves, but to protect others. In this election season, I keep seeing posts on Facebook urging me to vote as if the life of someone I love very much will be dependent upon the way I vote. It's not about what I want, it's about loving others enough to be sure that they are able to have what they need. We are interconnected. What affects one person affects all of us. We act on that when we love God with every ounce of our being and express that by loving others in the same way, or as much as, we love ourselves.

This week I was led to a TED talk by a Canadian forest ecologist Suzanne Simard called, "How Trees Talk to Each Other"<sup>iv</sup> She describes her research that proves that through their root systems, trees share carbon, phosphorous, water and other essential elements with each other. They not only share among their own species, but she proved that birch trees shared with fir trees and vice versa. They are interdependent, helping each other.

The trees are working together, communicating and participating in the health of the whole. This wonderful example from nature, reminds us of how interconnected we are; how the decisions we make affect others, how the well-being of others affects our well-being, how the health of others affects us and how our health can affect the health of others. It jumped out at me as an amazing way that creation emphasizes Jesus words to Love our neighbor as ourselves, and that this is essential to the way that we love God.

Steven Charleston is a citizen of the Choctaw nation of Oklahoma, a retired Episcopal Bishop and academic. He writes a daily meditation that almost always gives me pause to stop and think. On Friday morning, this is what he posted.

“You can tell when a trip is long because you start setting goals that mark your progress. Recently I was telling myself that I could make it to the final debate. Now that is done so I want to make it to the election itself. Then to the end of the year. Maybe it is a sign of fatigue, but I believe many of us are counting days now and watching for a new year. But I will tell you one thing: if I had to live through this long march through Covid-19, I could not ask for anything better than to make the trip with you. Seeing you here each day has kept me going. Just when I thought I was ready to sit down and give up, I would catch a glimpse of you helping others along the way and I would regain my strength. I know we will make it because you are showing the way. Not by counting days, but by caring for those around you. You embody an ancient truth known to any spiritual traveler: It is not how far we walk on our own, but how well we walk together that matters.”<sup>v</sup>

Let me repeat that: “It is not how far we walk on our own, but how well we walk together that matters.” “‘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.”<sup>vi</sup>

Let us pray, using a prayer that Rev. Ted Crass, the President of the United Methodist Foundation of New England shared this week:<sup>vii</sup>

Holy One,

Thank you for these commandments, which do not let me go.

I have good reasons not to love some of my neighbors –

They seem to value a way of living that will be the end of something that I hold dear.

They support a vision and leaders with policies that would hurt ... themselves.

Their vision threatens people I love and me.

Our fury is sometimes delicious.

(Are you sure that you love *my* neighbor?)

God of love, there are some days when I hope you will let me off the hook.  
But there it is: Jesus said, “On these two commandments hang all the law and prophets.”  
You have taught me that they are intimately intertwined –  
That we all are intimately intertwined –  
That I cannot really love you without the other.  
And so, I come back to you knowing that I need to get over... me.  
O Lord, stretch me in these days – even in uncomfortable, necessary ways –  
To widen my soul.  
I am ready. I am listening.  
Come alongside me and I will discover and fiercely hold onto compassion for these neighbors,  
As I do justice, love kindness and mercy, and walk humbly with you.  
Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Deuteronomy 6:4-9 CEB

<sup>ii</sup> Leviticus 19:18 and also 19:34

<sup>iii</sup> Upper Room Disciplines 2020 p.357

<sup>iv</sup> [https://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne\\_simard\\_how\\_trees\\_talk\\_to\\_each\\_other](https://www.ted.com/talks/suzanne_simard_how_trees_talk_to_each_other)

<sup>v</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/bishopstevencharleston> October 23, 2020

<sup>vi</sup> Matthew 22:37-40 NRSV

<sup>vii</sup> Posted in the New England Conference Daily Prayer during Covid. <http://neumc-email.brtapp.com/viewemail/2745577>