

Loving God Through our Neighbor

Matthew 22:34-46

October 25, 2020

Proper 25

“You shall Love the Lord your God, with all your heart and all your soul, and all your mind and all your strength and love your neighbor as yourself.” (Sung)

Here we are, in the middle of our annual stewardship campaign at St. Johns and today’s readings, focus on love. So, what **does** love have to do with it? Stewardship that is. Maybe there is a connection here.

Most of us have heard these readings before and if we pay attention to our presiding Bishop, his message is simple and clear, and it is always about love. The way of love. What the world needs now in this convergence of pandemics is love, sweet love. How can we build such a world?

In Thessalonians, Paul shares the importance of building community and to do that the young church must be able to proclaim and live today’s Gospel message: to love God and our neighbor. In that passage, Paul described his work among the Thessalonians with an image of a nurse, tenderly caring for her own children. To be community builders, we need to be open and vulnerable, willing to share with those around us. True community is built on trust, openness, sharing and most of all, love.

Moving on to Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus, faces yet another test from the Pharisees – who were undoubtedly gloating over the fact that the Sadducees had been silenced in an earlier challenge. A lawyer among them asks the famous question: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Now, we need to remember that the law of Moses was essential to the life of the Jewish people. His audience fully embraced Jewish tradition. How this question is answered will speak to Jesus’ credibility. The answer? Jesus quotes directly from the Torah – from the book of Moses: Deuteronomy, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might.” At this point, the Pharisees may be internally completing that message from Deuteronomy, “Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise.” Jesus has passed the test because those words are used in the Shema, which is the centerpiece of Jewish prayer. This affirms there is only one God who is a personal God and who demands love from the Jews with every aspect of their being. Keep those words in your heart. Loving God is a constant part of our being.

Jesus, however, offered an addendum by next quoting Leviticus, where he used the words of the Shema to the covenant between God and Israel. “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” No grudges! Who is our neighbor? Every practicing Jew in that day knew the Mosaic

law. Leviticus goes on to say: “When an alien (foreigner, refugee) resides with you in your land, you shall not suppress the alien. The alien who resides with you shall be to you as a citizen among you; you shall love the alien yourself, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt.” Ahhhh - there before the grace of God.... We have all been aliens at some time or another, but Leviticus reminds the Jews of God’s love in and his choosing to lead them out of bondage. The Jews, however, over the years, had created many layers of the law and while there were those for whom it was their responsibility to show love, many in the outer circles, like outcasts, sinners, tax collectors, Gentiles, Samaritans were to be loved less and some, in fact, not to be loved at all. Jesus has now linked the most important law of loving God, with loving our neighbor.

So...are we called to love the foreigner in our midst, the stranger in our midst, the person who looks different than you, who dresses differently than you, whose political view differs from yours? This is downright challenging and hard work indeed. Love in action. Love IS action. It is an active response of the faithful person to the love of God. We choose to respond even as God chooses to love us.

Many here who have children can relate to love as an action –groggy, yet getting up for the late night feedings, changing diapers, consoling the colicky baby, remaining lovingly patient when our toddler begins to assert his identity: “NO, I won’t do that!” and then again, in their teenage years when those challenges to authority sting. Not easy stuff. But then, there are those moments when we played the little back and forth game: “Jeremy, I love you soooo much.” “Mommy, I love you more.” “Jeremy, I love you till the cows come home.” “Mommy, Love you even more than Nintendo.” Jeremy, I love you to the moon and back,” “Mommy, I love you to infinity and beyond!” “Jeremy, I loved you first!”

Yes, God loved us first. So even when we ponder a commandment to love, if we acknowledge having received God’s love, or even remember a moment when God’s love touched us deeply, it becomes more and more easy to love another – from our hearts and not **just** because God commanded it.

Love is all about relationship – community. When we love together in community, we exhibit faithful stewardship – Stewardship in fact begins with loving relationships. When the Bible talks about love it primarily means a *love that keeps on loving*, it means *commitment*. To love one another, including our enemies, doesn’t mean we must **feel** affection for them, rather it means a commitment on our part to take their needs seriously, just as God committed himself to taking our needs seriously by sending his Son into this world.

How do we exhibit faithful stewardship of those around us? Our world has shrunk, and our community goes way beyond our homes, neighborhoods, churches, towns, states, and nations. God created us to be in relationship with God – but also with everyone we come in contact with --- or if not direct contact – then with those we are **aware of**, like refugees, homeless, the hungry, the disenfranchised. All people – perhaps especially the ones who challenge us the most, are gifts from God. To love another is to love the God within them. To love God is to love the people in whom God resides. Love changes us, challenges us, and ultimately transforms us.

Love **is** here at St. John's each time we donate food for our hungry. **Our** hungry – for they are ours to love. Love is **here** with every quarter offered for Laundry Love – so our neighbor can wear clean clothes. Love is **here** when we check-in with those who live alone. Love is **here** when someone who lives on the street receives a free jacket from our Thrift Shop. Love is **here** in every stitch of each prayer shawl and in every handmade project from St. Hilda's Guild.

Love knows no limits. It is meant to be given away. To love means deliberately to turn toward another person and their needs, to give away something of ourselves to someone else without thinking of what we will get in return. We teach our children to share, so too, we must share all the gifts God has given us – and that includes Love.

Let me leave you with a little song that I taught the children when I led music at Vacation Bible School. Believe me, the children get it:

Love is something if you give it away
give it away
Give it away
Love is something if you give it away
And you end up having more.

Love is like a shiny penny
Hold on tight and you won't have many
Lend it, spend it and you'll have so many
To share with all of the world.

So, Love is something if you give it away
Give it away
Give it away
Love is something if you give it away
And you end up having more.

Malvina Reynolds

Amen.