

**Love yourself, love your neighbor, love your God.**

**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.

**Sermon**

In the name of God: Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

Jesus is asked: Which commandment in the law is greatest? And he answers "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." But Jesus doesn't stop there he goes on to say "And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'" In this brief exchange Jesus does an amazing thing. He distills all the laws of Moses and the writings of the prophets, into a simple commandment of love. Love your God and love your neighbor. This may be a simple commandment to understand but it is NOT a simple commandment to keep.

The commandment to love forms the foundation of our faith and life together. The commandment to love is what Jesus came to teach and to demonstrate. And... even though the commandment to love has been on the books for quite a while... Jesus issues this challenge to us today. Love your God. Love your neighbor.

Today's passage comes on the heels of last weeks Gospel reading where we heard about how Jesus had silenced the Sadducees. Today it's the Pharisees that are taking a shot at Jesus.

The Sadducees and Pharisees appear often in the Gospel of Matthew. They are always treated as opponents of Jesus, and are sometimes lumped together. But the Sadducees and Pharisees were two very different groups in Judaism. They were two distinct religious, political parties and that had very different beliefs concerning Jewish law.

The Sadducees were priests of the Temple, and they believed in a very strict interpretation of the law, while the Pharisees favored a broader interpretation of the law

as informed by tradition. These two groups were on opposite sides of the religious and political landscape.

We hear today that about a Pharisee that tests Jesus. He is called a lawyer but more clearly, he is a religious scholar, an expert in the laws of Moses. We are told that with word spreading that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees came to see him. The Pharisees may have wanted to know if Jesus was on their side. You've heard the expression 'the enemy of my enemy is my friend.' It might have been helpful to the Pharisees to have such a learned Rabbi as Jesus on their side. So they came to Jesus to check him out.

They discovered pretty quickly that Jesus has a different agenda. In his answer, Jesus shows that he too, is an expert in the law. He quotes from Leviticus and Deuteronomy. He bests their expert at their own game. The greatest commandment is "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" Jesus says.

Now... that might have been enough to settle the question, but Jesus knows what the Pharisees are really after so he adds, "And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This must have caught the man up short. Jesus is clearly condemning the Pharisee for a lack of love. The Pharisee was not loving his neighbor at all, but quite the opposite in fact.

It is quite interesting that Jesus links these two commandments together. Somehow when I consider the greatest commandment, to love God with all your heart, soul, mind, I find myself wondering how? How do I do this? But if I consider trying to love my neighbor as myself, it seems somehow more concrete, more attainable. It's right there in front of me, everyday. It is still a challenge; don't get me wrong, but it seems somehow more doable.

So I think it is instructive to turn these commandments around and consider that in order to learn to love God with our whole being, we first need to learn to love our neighbor as ourselves. And let's go a step further. The path Jesus challenges us to take, the path of love, requires not only to love our neighbors, but to love our neighbors as ourselves. So, we need to love ourselves.

This is a detail we skip over sometimes, but just as God loves us, imperfect, sinful, just the way we are --- we need to love ourselves too. Certainly God wants us to become better people, to grow, to be transformed and made holy. And we know we have things to work on. But the way we learn to love ourselves is through caring for ourselves.

We need to take time to rest. Take time to pray. Take care of our bodies, and do things that feed our souls. It might be a hobby or a sport, or anything that recharges us and gives us energy. The things we try to do to care for ourselves too easily get pushed off our busy calendars. They are the first things to go when we get busy. So our challenge is

to put a higher value on our love of self, not to an extreme, not to be self-centered, just to be in balance.

How can we expect to be up to the challenge of caring for others, if we don't care for ourselves? This is an incremental process that God has started by loving us. We are challenged to respond by loving ourselves.

God loves us unconditionally and by the act of **our** creation, in God's likeness and image, we are wired to receive God's love and also to reflect it back to others. Loving is a transforming act, a sanctifying act, an act that brings us closer to God and makes us holier people. God showers us with love every day and has provided in us a capacity to share that love with our neighbors.

So... how do we do that? We see a great example of this later in Matthew's Gospel, in Chapter 25. In the parable of the sheep and goats, Jesus explains that the Son of Man will come and judge between those who have fed the hungry, given drink to the thirsty, cared for the sick and lonely. These are all ways of loving our neighbor. And when the time of judgment comes Jesus says: "whatever you did for one of the least of these, you did for me." In other words, it is through our love of our neighbors that we love God.

And we do this in many ways at St. Paul's. Our commitment to community outreach is terrific. This parish is generous and is concerned for our neighbors. The response to the "hymn-a-thon" and other disaster relief efforts are impressive and filled with a love of our neighbors.

Even the smallest acts of kindness are important. Little things like taking the parking space at the back of the lot so that someone less mobile can have the closer ones - seeking out a friend who has dropped out of contact - or offering a greeting and a smile to a stranger.

Another example of learning to love our neighbors is in the movie, *Pay it Forward*. It's one of my favorite movies. Have you seen it? This is a great movie with a terrific Christian idea. A central character in the movie is a 10-year-old boy, played by Haley Joel Osmond. His social studies teacher, played by Kevin Spacey, assigns the class a project. Come up with an idea that can change the world. Tough assignment.

The boy, whose life is not very good, he has abusive parents, trouble with bullies at school, not much in terms of creature comforts. This timid, unhappy kid comes up with the concept of "pay it forward." You do something important for someone and then, instead of asking them to pay you back - you ask them to pay it forward and do something important for someone else.

What the writer of this movie knows is that we are presented, everyday with chances to love our neighbors. Now, for those of you who haven't seen the movie, I won't give away the ending. But what happens in the movie shows that when they intentionally seek to love their neighbor, by the smallest act of kindness, they are forever changed. They

are transformed by the act of loving their neighbor. And it has a ripple effect throughout the community.

Love is the key. Love of God, love of neighbor, love of self. God's love of us is transforming and sanctifying. And even though our love is only a dim reflection of God's love for us, it is the path that Jesus challenges us to take. It is our challenge everyday. Let me sum up with a verse from one of my favorite hymns. The words are by Frederick William Faber. It is #469 in our hymnal.

*For the love of God is broader than the measure of the mind.  
And the heart of the Eternal is most wonderfully kind.  
If our love were but more faithful, we should take God at his Word  
And our life would be thanksgiving for the goodness of the Lord.*

Amen!