

Twenty-First Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 25
Year A

Everything Hangs on Love

[RCL] Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

An authority on the Law of Moses gives Jesus a pop quiz: name the greatest commandment. The request is not to name the top commandment of the Ten Commandments. Specifically, Jesus is to consider the 613 commandments found in the first five books of the Bible, known as the Torah, or *The Teaching*, and to select the cornerstone. These commandments include 365 “negative commandments”, sometimes described as one for every day of the year, where you are ordered not to do something, like, “Do not commit murder.” Then there are 248 “positive commandments” which describe what one is to do to faithfully follow the Torah, the teaching given to Moses.

But we know this is not a casual conversation among colleagues. Matthew reminds us that Jesus silenced the Sadducees, the priests who served at the Temple in Jerusalem. They asked their thorniest question about the Torah, and Jesus aced that test. Now it is the Pharisees’ turn. We use the term Pharisee today as a term of derision; we say someone is pharisaical if he or she is hypocritical or self-righteous. But this would not have been true during Jesus’ ministry.

The Pharisees were a sect within Judaism, which worked as a social movement seeking to change society with a greater faithfulness to following the Torah. The Pharisees championed synagogue worship in addition to going to the Temple. Jesus taught faithfulness to God and worshipped in the synagogue. Many persons would likely have seen Jesus as a Pharisee or at least being in line with the Pharisees’ school of thought. So this debate is a bit of an in-house argument.

The stakes are higher though, as the Pharisees in Jerusalem see Jesus’ growing influence on the crowds, and they seem to want to shut down this movement before it goes any further. The question then comes from a place not of wanting to learn but desiring to trip up the rabbi from Galilee. Jesus immediately answers with what is the most succinct statement of everything he taught and his every action:

“‘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.”

We are not just to love God, but our neighbor, and not just God and our neighbor, but we are to love ourselves, as only then can we love our neighbors as ourselves. Everything hangs on love.

The love Jesus is talking about here cost him his life, so this is love beyond mere sentimentality or emotion. Jesus teaches about the form of love that in Greek is called *agape*. This is a self-giving love, which is more concerned about the other person than oneself. Agape love starts with God, and God's love for us. With this love of God and God's love for me, I can then begin to see other people as God sees them. I can even begin to see myself as God sees me. From this experience, I reach out in love to others with the love that begins in the very life and nature of God.

The love that is within the Trinity is not merely a feeling or emotion. And so, God's love for your husband or wife is not dependent on his or her likes and dislikes, job, mood, or anything else so changeable. God's love for your brother or sister does not depend on whether he or she just got on your nerves. God's love for your co-workers does not depend on their lovability. God's love for your friends does not depend on whether or not they let you down. God's love for everyone else is a lot like God's love for you. This love is a lot more dependable than you or I, even on our best days.

Love that is more concerned about others than yourself is not about self-loathing, or being abused. Real love can also come with a hard edge, for it is not loving to become co-dependent and support someone in their abuse of their own bodies with drugs—legal or illegal—or alcohol abuse. Real love can mean setting clear boundaries. Love more concerned for the other can be lived in many ways that involve standing up to abuse and not letting it continue.

The love that wants something better than abuse and acts to make changes to end such needless suffering is part of the love God has for all creation. The love of God that was in the Trinity before creation overflowed into this world of ours, and that love continues even though we are fallen and not deserving of it. This love that was in the very life of God before Creation is the love that never fails. This is the love Jesus had, so that as he died on the cross he could look out at those who killed him, as they mocked him, and say, "Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."

Forgiving those who killed him was the most precarious thing an all-powerful God could do. And in these words of forgiveness from the cross, we see that God's love is more concerned about the other than your own self.

Agape love is a decision, an act of the will. Decide to see others as God sees them. Act on this decision rather than just whether you feel the emotions of love. Do you want to experience that sort of godly love for your friends, your family, your spouse? Then the love you have for them

cannot start with you and go out to them. The love you have for others must start with God. Ask God to give you this gift. Pray for God to reveal to you the way God sees these other people in your life, especially the difficult people you deal with.

Trying to decide what to do? Put agape into the equation. Should you forgive? Should you pick up the phone and make a call? Should you write a letter? Should you make a visit? Setting aside people who have a pattern of abuse that you must avoid, in the many garden-variety painful relationships in your life, the answer is love. The decision to forgive, or call, or write, or visit, or whatever it is that will make this love concrete should not depend alone on whether you have been hurt or could be hurt. The answer should depend on answering the question, “What would love do?”

This is how the ideal of loving God and loving your neighbor as yourself is made real. During this sermon, perhaps you have thought of someone who has hurt you, someone with whom you have lost contact, or broken off your relationship. Trust that the Holy Spirit has been involved in this person coming to mind. If this applies to you, then love is speaking to your heart—the love of God calling you to act on agape love.

This love I am talking about is a choice, a decision, an act of the will, and it belongs in the heart of your relationship with your spouse, your children, your parents, your siblings, your friends, your co-workers. Have the courage to not simply talk of love, but to put love into action. The love God has for you is patient and kind and will never fail. Choose to share that same amazing love with the people in your life.

Amen.

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