

Pentecost 24
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We live in a pretty unsettling time. Daily we hear about abrupt changes in the stock market, diplomatic incidents that could well plunge our country into conflict, evidence that the environment is being destroyed and escalating crime in our cities. Every report of bad news is cause to be concerned about the future. We try to calm ourselves with reason and analysis believing that if we can explain what is happening we can feel better.

The Gospel this morning is set in the context of pretty unsettled times during the life of Jesus and his followers. Jesus has arrived in Jerusalem where he has taught in the Temple. By all appearances the resistance against him is growing stronger and Matthew tells us Jesus is fully aware that he is on his way to die. As he faces up to the unknown, Jesus is challenged to define the law by which people are required to frame their lives as they deal with the uncertainty.

Let's set this scene in the context of today so we might better grasp what is going on in this incident. Imagine a presidential debate. The questioner asks the candidates to summarize all America law in one sentence or in a simple phrase that people can understand. John McCann might say "liberty" meaning each individual has the right to property and prosperity without government interference. Barack Obama might say "freedom and justice for all" meaning all classes, races, all kinds of people should enjoy an equal opportunity to get their piece of the American pie. Ron Paul might say "all men are created equal" Where upon women might ask, "What about us?" Summarizing the law is difficult.

In first century Judaism the Law referred to 613 commandments. Rabbis had tried to summarize the law but never without debate. If you believe that each commandment comes from God, then each of the 613 commandments reflects God's will. How can one assume to speak for God, much less attempt to summarize what God intends in the giving of the law?

A Pharisee, a religious man who tried to be a strict adherent of the law, asked Jesus a question, "Which is the greatest commandment of the law?"

Listen carefully to Jesus' response. Jesus said, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And the second is like it, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

From the vantage point of living in troubled times the first commandment makes perfect sense if you stop to think about the answer Jesus gave. After all what is the first thing we do when disaster strikes? We call on God. "O Lord, why me?" "God where are you in this hour of trial? Please help me, help us." Calling on God is the first thing we do when trouble comes. We turn to someone larger than ourselves to help solve our problem.

But Jesus is talking about not just turning to God when trouble strikes, rather we are told that we are to love God with all our being, with every little bit of ourselves, all the time. Why did Jesus think it was important to phrase his answer in this way? It is easy to realize we are not in control when things go wrong. We are willing at that point to accept our vulnerabilities and turn to a higher power that we hope is in control. Who among us can control the stock market? What can we do about international concerns and threats? Most of the time we feel pretty helpless when environmental concerns are raised. There is nothing we can do that seems like enough or even able to make a dent in the problem of pollution and global warming. That, I think, was Jesus point. The only one powerful enough to truly impact our life is the giver of life.

Jesus reminds us that no matter what circumstances we find ourselves in, God is ultimate and a loving God who cares about all of the creation and that is what really matters. As Jesus faced his own uncertain times he knew, no matter how bad things got in Jerusalem, his own death was not the final word and God would win the day. The commandment to love God with all our being is an assurance that God is ultimate. In loving God we involve ourselves in a power much bigger than ourselves.

Loving God, however, is only half of what Jesus tells us. The second part is the reminder that to love God involves loving our neighbor as ourselves. At first glance, the commandment to love our neighbor seems the opposite of loving God with our whole being. How can one love God with our whole being all the time and love our neighbor? Loving my neighbor means taking the affairs of this world seriously therefore I should be concerned about the stock market, I should do what I can to save the environment and I should work to resolve conflict in this world.

Loving my neighbor means acting in my neighbor's best interest and thus taking seriously economics, politics and environmental change.

Jesus adds, "On these two commandments hang the law and the prophets." What Jesus gives us is not two conflicting messages but an imperative that involves both love of God and love of neighbor. Jesus links the two together in essence saying, "You cannot love God unless you love your neighbor and you cannot love your neighbor unless you love God."

I admit, it is difficult for us to wrap our minds around this idea. Jesus talk of loving with our whole being involves more than just a sentimental feeling that makes us feel good. We know that we truly come alive when we love. Personal security is meaningless in the face of loving. Love involves a willingness to give ourselves to another, to serve the other out of intense respect and desire. To love is to free ourselves to be our best self for the sake of another. All risks are possible because nothing else is ultimate.

Jesus reminds us loving our neighbor is wrapped up in loving God because it is in our neighbor's face that we are able to see God. Jesus reveals that throughout his ministry but in no place better than in Matthew's Gospel. In the twenty fifth chapter of Matthew Jesus is talking about the end time. Jesus says, "Then the King will say to those at his right hand, 'Come O blessed of my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world; for I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me.'" Then the righteous want to know when did we offer food, drink, welcome or clothes to you? The King will answer, "Truly I say to you, as you did it to the least of my brothers or sisters you did it to me,"

The signs of love can be seen in the risks we take for justice and in the choices we make about how to live. The way we treat the poor, the homeless, the hungry says something about our understanding of God and of ourselves. Jesus is inviting us to see the big picture. The big picture takes control out of our hands and places it where it belongs with the Almighty, Creator of heaven and earth. We are to recognize our place in the creation and love God, the source of all life, with all of our being. In the big picture every human being is a child of God and our brother or sister therefore love of neighbor is tied to love of God. Living into this picture, we by the grace of God, are able to follow Jesus in fulfilling God's law. Love of God, love of neighbor is what it is all about.

