

Love Commanded
Matthew 22: 34 – 40
Sermon by Brenda Baker
October 26, 2008

Have you ever read a book or seen a movie more than once and each time you read it or see it you discover something new that you didn't notice before? Now, I know that we are all familiar with the breakfast cereal "Kellogg's Corn Flakes". They have been around for a long, long time. (Since 1906 to be exact.) Well, a few years back, as part of their advertising campaign, the Kellogg's company wanted to revitalize Corn Flakes to the consumers and so as part of their slogan they said, "Kellogg's Corn Flakes, experience them again for the first time." I would offer to you the same suggestion today as Kellogg's did back then, that when it comes to this passage in Matthew 22, about the Greatest Commandment, one that we have heard many times before; that perhaps we might "experience it again for the first time."

In this passage Jesus talks about love; love of God, love for ourselves and love for our neighbor. We are told to love God as we love ourselves and I think that it is very appropriate. God created us ~ while we are told to love God with all of our heart, soul and mind God is SO aware that, as humans, we are going to let "self" get in the way, at times. While we strive to love with our whole selves, God knows us better than we know ourselves. How wonderful it is that in addition to commanding that we love God, we are also commanded to love ourselves. And, built in to this is a way for us to not only allow for self-care, but also the understanding that, it is a part of human nature and it is a part of the love we have for ourselves that may "get in the way" of loving God with our WHOLE self.

So what is this part about loving yourself? Doesn't that sound selfish? Are we really supposed to love ourselves? Indeed, we are commanded to do so. And, as a part of loving ourselves, we must look into ourselves and ask if we are being true to who it is that we are being "called" to be. For I would offer that just as we are commanded to love GOD with all our heart, mind and soul then, we, as creations of God, should be held to the same standard in loving ourselves; that is, to love ourselves with all our heart, and with all our soul and with all our mind.

So I ask these questions. Do we, as children of God, take care and nurture ourselves in matters of the heart? Are we building and fostering healthy relationships with one another? Are we taking time to understand what we need for our physical bodies? Some of our physical bodies truly are in need of physical exercise, others of us are in need of both physical and/or emotional Sabbath time. Do we develop our spiritual lives and overall sense of knowledge? Do we challenge ourselves to be the best that we can be? To me, this is a part of being authentic and complete in our love for ourselves.

But, you see, there is more. Love is not something that you can keep for yourself. Just as God did not keep love ~ rather, God shared love through Jesus Christ. This kind of love, this agape love, WE must also share. We are commanded to love our neighbor. And we are told how to love our neighbor. Yes, we are told to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. Sometimes this is easy – we all have neighbors that are easy to get along with; like-minded and with similar tastes, or the ones that just mind their own business. But what

about the “Mr. or Ms. Grumpy” neighbor or the neighbor you’ve been told is dangerous, or worse? How do we love the unloveable?

Let’s go back to the passage for a moment. The lawyer is asking Jesus a question. This is a really good, quality-type question. Now this Pharisee lawyer, appears to be asking in a “Joe Friday – Dragnet- kind of way in that he wants the facts; just the facts.” **“What is the greatest commandment of all?”**

Now the Pharisees were known for how meticulous they were in their religious observances. Most of them were very disciplined in their conduct and were intent on bringing religion to the people. And notice the story here tells us how they gathered together when they heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees – were who a group of powerful aristocratic priests. But the Pharisees had a history of also being generous – to a fault- in that they would be generous to the needy that they interpreted to be “good enough” or “worthy enough”. However, if they judged someone not to be keeping the outward religious observances to their liking, they would not buy from them or have any dealings with them. They would not have any associations with foreigners. It was not uncommon to see the Pharisees wrap their robes around themselves tightly so as to avoid contamination from others around them.

When I think about this explanation ~ I begin to have so many “ah-ha” moments for myself and then so many “oh-no” moments, as well. My “ah-ha” moments come when I think about so many of the Bible stories that I’ve read “Either make the tree good, and its fruit good, or make the tree bad, and its fruit bad; for the tree is known by its fruit. That whatever we sow we shall also reap.” (Matt.12:33) And, “to become like children, with child-like humility and

boundless forgiveness.” (Matt.18:3) The Bible is chock-full of these stories and I love them. They always make me want to say “oh yes!” out loud. But then, I take a step back and examine myself a bit and think “oh no” when I wonder how well **I** carry this out – truly – ,on a daily basis, when it comes to this “loving my neighbor” thing. Or do I have a tendency to be like the Pharisees and kind of pick and choose when it comes to loving those that do things differently than I do, or have different ways of expressing their beliefs or ideas?

How do I really show love to my neighbor – my different or difficult neighbor? I know my natural tendency is avoidance; to let someone else do it. I mean, gee, I already have so much “on my daily plate” anyway. I’ll just leave that to someone else.

Sometimes, for me, it is a matter of really putting in some thought and awareness as to who my neighbor is that I have **not** had relationship with and why. Then I find that if I intentionally bring matters to my own awareness and I begin to put prayer toward these concerns ~ eventually ~ I figure out the next step in my process.

I grew up in the metropolitan D.C. area. National news was local news. Life was always busy. Prior to enrolling at Andover Newton, I lived in Wake County, NC for 30 years. It has a marvelously diverse population from one side of the county to the other which has grown by leaps and bounds over the last 10 – 15 years. I love the South because the pace is truly a bit slower – as is our Southern drawl – and, for the most part, this slower pace is acceptable.

Now as an elementary school teacher, I was in the classroom 7 years ago, on that Tuesday morning September 11, 2001. While we were trying to maintain

a sense of normalcy for those 7 and 8 year olds, we knew the world outside those walls would not be the same again. All of our lives changed that day.

For some, we began to realize just how precious our loved ones are to us and how important it is to express that love all of the time; to never miss an opportunity. For other, loving neighbors ~ even perfect strangers in need of help became more a part of our lives; for some, almost immediately. For still others, a definite "we" versus "they" mentality set in. We were hurt, we were angry and we were scared. All of those feelings were understandable.

Yet, it is what actions we take and how we express those feelings, that are, indeed, important. For we are reminded that we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves ~ even the ones we don't like; even the ones that we consider "the enemy"; even the ones we consider unlovable. I would offer that it is a matter of attitude; an attitude that we CAN control. It is a practice; a daily practice of this "agape" ; this love that we enact and we demonstrate daily to this God and through this God that loves us SO much. This love which God tells us is the GREATEST and that we should put all of our heart, & soul and mind into. This loving of our God and this same love that should bind us, each of us, one to another.

I received an email yesterday entitled "What is Love?". I thought that it was rather timely considering my sermon for today. In it, were quotes from children ages 4 through 8 in which they were asked to tell what love means. Here are just a few of their responses:

"When someone loves you, the way they say your name is different.

You just know that your name is safe in their mouth." (Billy, age 4)

“Love is what makes you smile when you are tired.” (Terri, age 4)

“Love is what is in the room with you at Christmas

if you STOP opening presents and listen.” (Bobby, age 7)

“Love is like a little old woman and a little old man who are still friends even after they know each other so well.” (Tommy, age 6)

“If you want to learn to love better, you should start with a friend who you hate.” (Nikka, age 6)

My prayer is that we can, indeed, Love God, Love ourselves, and Love our neighbors with fullness of heart, from the depths of our souls and with the openness of mind as God has loved us ! May it be so.

BENEDICTION

Go forth into the world to serve God with gladness;
be of good courage; hold fast to that which is good;
render to no one evil for evil; strengthen the fainthearted;
support the weak; help the afflicted; honor all people;
love and serve God, rejoicing in the power of the Holy Spirit.
And may the love of God and the grace of Jesus Christ,
and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you all. AMEN