

The Ultimate Commandments Deuteronomy 6: 1-9 Matthew 22: 34-40

The words found in the scripture readings this morning are probably some of the most familiar portions of the Bible along with Psalm 23, the Ten Commandments and the Lord's Prayer. Actually, if you were asked to give a short summary of the teachings of the Bible, the lines from Matthew, "Love God above all and your neighbor as yourself" would be about as succinct as you could get. If you were to analyze the Ten Commandments, you would indeed find Jesus' response to the lawyer in our Matthew scripture a synopsis of them. All of the Ten Commandments speak either to our attitude toward God (commandments 1-4) or our responsibilities towards others (commandments 5-10).

The basic wording of these two commandments is also found in Mark 12: 28-34 and Luke 10: 25-28. I found it interesting to note that these portions of Mark, Luke or our Matthew scripture for this morning are included in each of the three year's lectionary cycle- one each year. Next year the Mark 12 scripture will be the focus. It is obvious that these Ultimate Commandments are considered to be central to the Christian faith and life and bear repeating each year. Few other scriptural concepts follow that quite as closely.

Often in the New Testament we find numerous times when the religious leadership of the day attempted to test Jesus or trap him by his own words so they could bring him to justice. Over and over we find Jesus, especially through the use of parables, turning the tables on them and they were forced to face their own shortcomings. In our Matthew scripture for today we find once again a lawyer member of the Pharisees testing Jesus, "Which commandment in the law is the greatest?" Jesus answers the question by quoting two Old Testament texts: Deuteronomy 6:5 and Leviticus 19:18. Our Deuteronomy scripture this morning used similar wording to the phrase, "Love God above all." And we read in Leviticus 19:18, "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself..." Thus, we find that the reply of Jesus to the question from the Pharisee lawyer is not original with him. He, in fact, lifts up the command to love God above all from Deuteronomy and the command to love neighbor as oneself from Leviticus. What makes the reply of Jesus revolutionary is that he joins them. What was new was not the CONTENT of Jesus' teaching on the subject but his REDEFINITION of love toward God. As we express a relationship to God, we find it borne out in our relationship to other human beings. One cannot separate love for God from love of neighbor. Nor is it possible to truly love one's neighbor and oneself without having a sincere love for God. The Pharisee is asking Jesus to name "the" law that stands over all others but he refuses to do so. Whatever trap the lawyer

may have thought he was setting, Jesus evades it by replying firmly in the Judeo tradition. Within these two commandments taken from the Old Testament- Deuteronomy and Leviticus- Jesus summarizes the full content of the Torah and the prophets' preaching on it. Jesus response, though not original, came from the very heart of Judaism- Christians and Muslims could agree with it as well. What set Jesus' answer apart was the fact that Jesus put love of neighbor and one's self on the same level with love for God, thus making them of equal importance. Jesus, in effect, combines these two commandments into two great and ultimate commandments. Do you catch the new interpretation Jesus has put on Jewish law? Not through legalistic observance of particular commandments can one observe the law, but through a sense of love for God which is expressed through concrete actions toward ourselves and our neighbors. It is truly a unique aspect of Jesus' version in which love of neighbor and oneself are put on an equal footing with love for God and all are united into one commandment.

It must be recalled in light of what Jesus has said earlier in other settings, that love for neighbor includes love for one's enemy. This is where Jesus would have raised the greatest resistance from his listeners, and likely from many of us. To love others who we feel are like us, is one thing. But to love one's enemies such as terrorists and those who choose to increase their own wealth by taking advantage of others, is quite another. It is on the cross that we can begin to understand what Jesus means when he speaks of love for one's enemies. The love for God may be symbolized by the upright part of the cross, and love for neighbor by the arms of the cross. Together they point to God, who loved us in Christ on the cross and in response, we are commanded to return love both for God and neighbor.

I believe what Jesus wants us to see is that the "law of love" calls us to that kind of life which makes society not merely bearable, but of superior quality. He does not want us merely to tolerate one another, like factions in a church or neighborhood who do no harm to each other- while ignoring one another. Christ wants our love to be active—the second mile, the other cheek, the cloak as well as the coat. In these days of a political climate that seems bent on putting one another in the worst possible light, it seems the command to love neighbor as oneself could serve also as the bedrock foundation for a democratic society.

There is a part of loving one's neighbor as oneself that has always felt to me to be brushed over and not emphasized. I suppose it comes from the old Puritan emphasis on being humble. But, listen again to what Jesus says.....love your neighbor AS you love yourself. (repeat)
There are so many people in our day that struggle with a desperate desire to feel they have

value- they lack a sense of self worth. They are very quick to muddle around in what they feel are their own short-comings but brush away any suggestion that they might be good at something- that they might have particular gifts and skills which will serve to advance the kingdom of God. If we must love our neighbors AS OURSELVES, in order to fulfill this Ultimate Commandment- "love God above all" just how well do we fulfill any of it when we put down our own selves? Just how well can we truly love God and our neighbor, when we spend even some of our time believing that God makes junk and we are on the top of that junk pile? Is it not possible that we have been created to use the multitude of skills provided by God for the furtherance of God's kingdom? I would hope that the consideration of these Ultimate Commandments today would be a time for each of us to admit to and celebrate our own individual skills and gifts and how they can be used for God's work, especially in this time and place. Maybe we don't even need to admit them out loud- after all, we have been taught to be humble- but we do need to use them! I have often thought how wonderful it would be to put up a huge chart on a wall in this building with every church member's picture and name on it and along side each have others in the congregation document the skills and gifts they see in each other. I believe- without a doubt- that this church would quickly realize the untapped and unbelievable potential that is available to our congregation. Our problem is not that we lack potential, but the problem is that too often we hesitate to even try! It just seems easier to wring our hands over the burden of too few people and too few dollars, too few children, and too few, too few, too few!! At this juncture in our congregation's life, the realization of each individual's skill/s as well as the celebration and use of them is critical to our image of ourselves and to our very future! What new pastor would consider a call to a church who thinks they are a lost cause? If we believe we are dying as a church, rest assured, we ARE! It has been said that a church who feels their goal is to simply SURVIVE will surely die. But a church who feels their goal is to SERVE will thrive. How many of society's problems would be nonexistent if multitudes of people loved God, themselves and their fellow human beings to the degree that Jesus is describing? The power of the spiritual realm is waiting to be harnessed for humanity's good. The Ultimate Commandments- "Love God above all and love your neighbor as yourself" hold the key.

This story was written by Zig Ziglar. An old man stood on a Virginia riverbank many years ago. He was waiting to cross the river and, since it was bitterly cold and there were no bridges, he would have to "catch a ride" to the other side. After a lengthy wait he spotted a group of horsemen approaching. He let the first one pass, then the second, third, fourth and fifth. One horseman remained. As the rider drew abreast, the old man looked him in the eye and said,

“Sir, would you give me a ride across the river?” The horseman immediately replied, “Certainly.” Once across the river, the old man slid to the ground. “Sir,” the horseman said before leaving. “I could not help but notice that you permitted all the other men to pass by without asking for a ride. Then, when I drew abreast, you immediately asked me to carry you across. I am curious as to why you didn’t ask them and you did ask me.” The old man quietly responded, “I looked into their eyes and could see no love and knew in my own heart it would be useless to ask for a ride. But when I looked into your eyes, I saw compassion, love and the willingness to help. I knew you would be glad to give me a ride across the river.” The horseman was touched. “I’m grateful for what you are saying,” he said. “I appreciate it very much.” With that, Thomas Jefferson turned and rode on his horse off to the White House. Ziglar reminds us that our eyes are the windows of our souls. Then he asks a pointed question: “If you had been the last horseman, would the old man have asked you for a ride?” (repeat)

Love God with all your heart, soul, strength and might and love your neighbor as yourself. Go in peace. Amen

- Karen Houtman 10-25-2020