

THREE-DIMENTIONAL LOVE

Pentecost 21 Year A

Dt. 34:1-12; Ps. 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thess. 2:1-8; Mt. 22:34-46

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The story is told about a woman who brought her husband to their pastor and told him, “I feel that my husband doesn’t love me as much he should. So we’re thinking of getting a divorce, but we want to know what you think.” So the pastor said to the husband, “The Bible says you should love your wife as much as Christ loved his church. Can you do that?” He says, “No, I don’t think so.” The pastor says, “Well then, let’s begin at a lower level. The Bible also says that you should love your neighbour as you love yourself. Can you at least love her as much as you would love a neighbour?” The husband says, “No. That’s still too difficult.” In exasperation, the pastor finally told him, “The Bible says, ‘Love your enemies’. Begin there.”¹

Love is certainly something that the world today needs to experience more of. John Lenin said, “All you need is love.” Smart man! But how do we understand the concept of love today, in a world that has changed, misconstrued and taken away all the innocence and purity of the word? It’s kind of ironic really that something so absolutely essential to our life and our well-being should be so little understood and so badly abused in our day-to-day lives.

In today’s passage from Matthew’s account of the Gospel, Jesus is confronted once again in an attempt by the Jewish authorities, to trick him into saying something by which they can accuse him of heresy—or at least make him unpopular with the people. Either result would have been fine. They have already asked him a practical question about the payment of taxes—to which he gave a very ambiguous reply. They have asked him a theological question about resurrection—a subject upon which the Pharisees and Sadducees argued and differed—and set them apart even more. And now a legal eagle asks him a question on something, around which their entire lives were wrapped: “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

Now, at first glance, it might appear that the answer is obvious, and perhaps it is. But the lawyer is not asking Jesus to choose from out of ten laws—the Ten Commandments—but out of a total of 613 commandments that the rabbis had added up throughout the Torah.

¹ From Learning to Love, by Erwin Lutzer in *Preaching Today*, Tape No. 99. From the *Bible Illustrator*, Parsons Technology, Hiawatha, IA. (This resource, as well as many others, is available at a discount through the Homiletic Resource Center.)

The rabbis would often sit around debating which one or ones were most important. When Micah, the Old Testament prophet, answers the question about what God requires, he summarises the 613 in just three: do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

As we've come to expect, Jesus is never one to have his answer limited by the boundaries of the question. In this instance, he gives two answers to the one question. The first is one with which his listeners are familiar. Not only is it the first of the Ten Commandments, but it is also from the second part of the Shema, the prayer that forms the basic and essential creed of Judaism—a prayer said to this day in Synagogues around the world. It begins, "Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord is one." (Dt. 6:4)

Jesus picks up the passage at this point and responds, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment." In other words, we are to love God with all that we are—with our entire being. It means that we should give to God a love that dominates our emotions, directs our thoughts and is the driving force behind all of our actions.

What would it be like for you and me to love God every waking moment—to love God with every fibre of our being—to love God with every thought and every emotion? How would our actions, and indeed our entire lives change if we were to focus our attention and energy on God rather than on the petty irritations and distractions that so often interrupt our lives?

Well, that was the first and as Jesus said, the greatest commandment—and if we were making the response, most of us would have probably left it there. But Jesus doesn't leave it there—he goes on. There was another commandment—somewhat like the first—and as far as Jesus was concerned, equally as important. It was the one that covered all of the remaining 612 commandments that the Pharisees had formulated over the years. "You shall love your neighbour as yourself."

Now, if you think about it, there are two problems here. It's not just a matter of loving your neighbour in some ethereal or subjective sense...(He's a really good bloke.) In order to love your neighbour as Jesus is suggesting, you must also and first, love yourself. That, for many people today, is the greater issue than simply loving your neighbour.

Psychologists and psychiatrists today, have to deal in increasing amounts, with people who *do not* or *cannot* love themselves. Many people are born with some kind of disability or disadvantage, or who have had abusive parents or spouses and have great difficulty in loving themselves. This, of course, will affect how they treat others. It doesn't take a rocket scientist to work out that if you don't love yourself, you will have a difficult time loving others.

But we are called to love ourselves—not in some arrogant or self-fulfilling sense—but to see ourselves as God sees us—to see ourselves as chosen—as redeemed—as people for whom God longs to have a long and close relationship.

Too often we see ourselves only as we imagine others see us. We see ourselves as broken and imperfect. Yes, we have our faults. Yes, we are often deformed—if not physically, then mentally or emotionally. But in spite of that, God sees us as his own—sees us as worthy enough to send his Son to die on a cross for us.

When we see ourselves as God sees us, then we have the opportunity to see others as God sees them. Only when we understand the extent of God's love for us are we able to love our neighbour as ourself. As God loves us, so we should love one another.

In Luke's parallel passage to this one, a scribe also asks the question about the greatest commandment, but instead of answering it, Jesus throws the question back at him and asks him what the Law says. Not being content with answering his own question, the scribe asked another question "Who is my neighbour?" To answer this question, Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. Now the Jews considered only fellow Jews to be their neighbours. But as the parable points out so well, it was "a man" who was going from Jerusalem to Jericho. Not a Jew, not a Levite, or even another Samaritan, just a "man". Therefore, the implications are that everyone, regardless of their race, colour, religion, sex or national origin, is our neighbour and we must be prepared to help them—to exercise our love for God through acts of kindness towards others.

When you act with kindness to those in need, you demonstrate love for God. Without love towards others...our worship, scripture study, and prayer become hollow and meaningless.

What is especially fascinating is that love, exercised in these three dimensions—towards God, towards self and towards others—are interdependent. Our love for God is expressed in our love for others. Our love for others is an expression of our love for God.

Our love for ourselves is also understood from the context of God's love for us—a love that enables us to love ourselves and to love our neighbour.

And yes, we are also commanded to love our enemies and to do good to those who persecute us. Darn! Don't you just hate that bit? But there's no getting around it. No one is to be excluded from our love—just as no one is excluded from God's love.

Today's reading from the gospel tells us that we need to put our priorities in order and love God above all else. That's why we're here. That's what our worship is all about. It's not about us or how we feel, but about offering to God our adoration and praise.

As the great prophet of our age—Janet Jackson (who knew?)—once said: “The greatest achievement to any human being is to love God, yourself, and others.”

Our love of God should come, first, from our realization that God has first loved us, especially as shown through the life and example of his Son, Jesus Christ. Second, it means that we should have a healthy love of ourselves, which comes from a knowledge of God's love for us. And third, we must express that love of God and ourselves in our love for our neighbour. And this love must be expressed in both words and in actions.

Love of God. Love of self. Love of neighbour. Easy to talk about—not always easy to live out. But when we do—when we catch a glimpse of God's great love for us—when we begin to understand the cost of that love—we will want to express, in return, our love for God—not only in our regular worship—but outwardly, daily, towards others. And that love, expressed in action, will change us, and our surroundings. It will change the way we view God, the way we view ourselves, the way we view the world in which we live and the way we view each other.

Through Jesus, our loving Father has taught us to love God above all else and to love one another as we love ourselves. May God grant us the grace of his Holy Spirit to put into practice in our daily lives the guidance he has given us. May each of us learn what it means to be loved by God so that we in turn can share that love with one another.

To God be all the glory, honour and praise. Amen.