

The Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost  
Matthew 22:34-46  
The Rev. Joel W. Huffstetler  
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One of the great Bible scholars of the twentieth century said about today's gospel passage: "We may well say that here Jesus laid down the complete definition of religion." A strong statement. Love of God and love of neighbor. The author is asserting that everything else is commentary. Everything else is detail, everything else is variation on the theme of love of God and love of neighbor.

Another New Testament scholar has written that the passage is "the full scope of Jesus' teaching." Another strong statement. A third Biblical scholar has written about today's passage: "The essence of the divine will is expressed in these two commandments." What is it that God is trying to have humanity learn? What's the essence of the relationship that God wants with humanity? Love returned to God, and love of neighbor.

So let's hear just the first part of this gospel lesson again: "When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, '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."

By the time of Jesus' life in the first century the original code of Ten Commandments that had been given by God to Moses on Mt. Sinai had been expanded over the years to 613 commandments. 613 commandments! Just think how much harder Sunday School would have been. 'Okay children, who knows the commandments?' 613 teachings of what we are to do, or in some cases what we are not to do. Some of these commandments were

little, tiny details about dietary regulations, or nuanced understanding of what one could or could not do on the Sabbath. So, it's a perfectly good question for a thoughtful Jew to ask this rabbi, Jesus. It's a perfectly reasonable question: Out of 613 commandments, which is the commandment that is the greatest? What is it that we really need to know? What is foundational? What is it that we have to grasp so that we can then make sense of the rest? It's a perfectly fair question. And Jesus' answer is as straightforward as it can be: Love God with your entire being is the greatest commandment. Honor the Lord your God. And along with that love your neighbor as yourself. And everything else after that - as important as it may be - is detail. As important as the other understandings are, it's all based on love of God, and love of neighbor. So that has to be where a life of faith begins. To build a house that will last you must have a strong foundation, and the foundation of the life of faith is love of God with our total being: body, mind, soul, and, in the other synoptic gospels, strength. The totality of our being is to be centered in remembering God's love for us and in remembering our responsibility to give that love back. The response to Love is love. And then, we're to love our neighbor. Not because it's easy necessarily in some cases, but because they too are children of God.

There are no platitudes in this sermon. If 'Love your neighbor' was easy we wouldn't struggle with it. We wouldn't struggle with it here in Cleveland. We wouldn't struggle with it with regard to different regions of this country, different ideologies, let alone the geopolitical realities of our world. If love of neighbor was easy, then it wouldn't be such a struggle.

So, I was thinking this week about what would be a key to get a handle on a deeper understanding of love of neighbor? How do we get at what Jesus is really teaching here? And one way to understand love of neighbor is to understand that we are to see others as God sees them, and to remember that they are objects of God's love just like we are. To

see others as God sees them, not as we see them. When we see difference, we may think that there is a barrier between us. When we see otherness we may think of the difficulty in communication. When we see people who are different from us, cultures that are different from us, ideologies that are different, we think of incompatibility. Love of neighbor here can't be allowed to just be a platitude, words, and empty rhetoric. It's hard work to remember that God loves that other person just as much as God loves us.

And so the challenge for us is to come to see each other not just from a human point of view. A human point of view will always see the differences - differences of race, culture, language, ideology. But when we see from God's perspective we see preciousness, irreplaceability, a person who is loved equally as we are, created in the image of God just like us. If this was easy we wouldn't struggle with it. Think about the reality of the challenge of people getting along here in this community. Think about it nationally, and then internationally. There's nothing easy about taking this commandment seriously, but it's our calling as people of faith to change our starting point when we deal with otherness. When we see difference, when we know that there's a gap between what we think and what 'they' think, for people of faith the starting point is love rather than indifference. It's a desire to find a way to communicate rather than to assume that no bridges can be built.

Love of God is the beginning point of all of this. The beginning point of being able to love neighbor is to recognize that they too are created in the image of God. They too are objects of God's love. And it is God's will that we come to see each other as sisters and brothers and not as other, as enemies. The realities of how to bring this dream to fruition are difficult. But it's still our calling to have the right beginning point when we see others. To see them as God sees them. To see them as our sister or brother. If this starting point isn't reciprocated then it gets more difficult. I can assure you that I live in the same real world that

you do. It's difficult when this love isn't reciprocated, but it is the starting point. And it's where we're called to return when we know that we've drifted away from this foundational understanding. Think about all the commercials you see on television for 'foundation repair.' Sometimes the foundation needs a little shoring up. This gospel passage does that.

Some of these passages week to week are pretty difficult to understand. This one's pretty clear, isn't it? The difficulty is not in understanding but in disciplining ourselves to practice it. When we see someone different from us, someone whom we know we are not going to get along with easily - rather than assuming, rather than preparing to be defensive, our starting point is meant to be the memory that that person is loved by God. That person is our sibling in our humanness.

I close with one verse from 1 John. The First Epistle of John takes this teaching from the gospel and tries to help a congregation live it very early in the Christian history. 1 John 4:20: "Those who say, 'I love God,' and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." One of the great, practical teaching moments in all of the Bible. It takes this understanding from Jesus and tries to help people put it into practice. "If you say you love God but hate a brother or a sister in the human family then you are a liar." How can we love God whom we have not seen, says John, when we have each other and don't show love? It's an incredibly challenging understanding.

I conclude with this. The first bishop I ever served under was a man named Robert H. Johnson in the Diocese of Western North Carolina. I was 27 years old when I was turned loose on the church, very young when I was ordained. Bishop Johnson was wonderful to me, very supportive. He was unfailingly supportive. I saw him at a colleague's funeral last December and it was wonderful to see him again. We had a very warm reunion. I had not

seen him in 20 years; he came over and we had a wonderful moment together. Bishop Johnson used to teach us in the Diocese of Western North Carolina, clergy and laity: "Before you say anything, before you do anything, before you continue down a train of thought, ask yourself the question: 'Is it loving?'" A wonderful way to apply today's teaching from our Lord. Before you say, or do, or continue to think anything ask yourself the foundational question: Is it loving? Amen.