

Sermons at St. Luke's

A sermon preached by the Rev. Joseph H. Hensley, Jr. on Sunday, October 26, 2008.

Hear again these words from the Gospel according to Matthew: 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." Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself. As Christians, we know these commandments well. And we also know how difficult they are to put into practice. What does this kind of love look like in the real world?

It might help us to have a little bit of backstory on this morning's reading. Remember that we are reading from the Gospel according to Matthew. This same story of Jesus being questioned by the Jewish religious authorities appears in Mark and Luke as well, but Matthew's account is distinctive in its focus on the pharisees as the questioners of Jesus. Matthew was writing his narrative 40 or 50 years after Jesus at a time when his community of Jewish Christians was being harshly treated by the pharisees, the strict religious lawyers of the Jewish synagogues. Mark and Luke both mention other religious leaders and are even somewhat charitable in their portrayal. Matthew is very particular in talking about pharisees, and he makes them look pretty bad. This morning's reading is typical of Matthew in that the pharisees are portrayed as aggressive against Jesus, unwilling and unable to accept his teaching. When we remember that Matthew was writing during times of political and religious tension in his community, we can detect his animosity. In some ways, this episode and others like it in Matthew resemble some of the negative political ads we see on television these days: "The Pharisees. They claim to know the law, but they can not even recognize the Messiah. The Pharisees: not ready to believe!" By casting the opponents of his community in this way, Matthew might be attempting to rally his readers, Jews who have been marginalized because of their Christian faith. The question I would have for Matthew is this: how do you love your neighbor, the Pharisee, while at the same time portraying him in such a negative light?

The question hits home for us in these final days of the political campaigns. Differences between neighbors are magnified when we see opposing political signs and bumper stickers next door to each other. Tensions are running high. All sides are very concerned that their right to a free and fair election may be compromised. Attacks on and by the candidates seem to get more personal. And it does not help that we are also very unsettled by the chaos of the financial markets. Uncertainty is in the air like a stormy cloud, and it feels ominous. So how, in the midst of all this tension do we love God, and love our neighbor as ourselves? How on November 5, will we love our neighbor who voted differently than we did? How will Republicans, Democrats, Independents, Greens, and Libertarians love each other in the midst of disappointment and celebration, victory and defeat? Is it even possible? And what about our neighbors in the world? I have noticed that we have allowed our political candidates to focus mainly on the economy and foreign policy. Have we lost sight of issues like immigration and world poverty? How do we love our neighbors who continue to come to this country because the worst economy here is better than the best economy they have at home? How do we love our

poorest neighbors around town and around the world who have little to eat? How do we love?

I want to pause here to recognize the tension that might be in this room right now. Some of us come to church wanting a break from all the talk about politics and world affairs. And here is "Joe the preacher" throwing it in your face again. If we wanted politics on Sunday morning, we would stay home and watch t.v. talk shows. If you feel that way, please know that your view is important. Your view matters. At the same time, I hope we can invite God into this tension. I hope that together we can reflect on our common life in ways that bring us closer to God and each other. I hope we can seek some guidance in scripture about how to love our neighbors in the midst of uncertainty and chaos. Please bear with me as we dive back into scripture and look for some inspiration.

Jesus, in quoting the two greatest commandments, is referring to two passages in the Jewish law, the Torah. The first, love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength is from Deuteronomy chapter 6. It is the passage which devout Jews recite every day, the passage they put on doorposts to greet them every time they leave or come home. Love God. This kind of love is not necessarily affectionate love. While our relationship with God can involve affection and emotion, no one, not even God can command a feeling. It just does not work. The kind of love we are to show God is more like a sense of loyalty and devotion. It is like the love a servant shows a master, a love of devoted service. Another way of thinking about it is that we are to love God the way die hard sports fans love their favorite teams. Even when the team strategy makes no sense, even when we're not even sure they are on the field or the court, we continue to cheer and offer praise. We buy season tickets. We watch until the end of every game. The kind of love we are commanded to have for God is devoted love, love that shows up and sticks around even when we do not feel like it. The second commandment that Jesus quotes, Love your neighbor as yourself, comes from Leviticus chapter 19. Right before the part about loving your neighbor as yourself, the scripture says that we are not to hold grudges or seek vengeance against our neighbor and that we should tell our neighbor when they are doing something that bothers us. Loving, in this case, implies a sense of honesty and telling the truth. When we love our neighbor, we may not like them or feel anything for them, but we honor them enough to tell them the truth and we are willing to hear the truth from them. So if we look at these two commandments: Love God and love your neighbor as yourself, we might begin to see that loving is a matter of being a devoted servant and being honest. In short, the love we are commanded to give God and each other and ourselves is true love. Love that is true. The word, true, means both devoted and honest. As we strive to understand what Jesus is talking about we might restate it this way: Be true to God with all your heart, soul, and strength. And be true to your neighbor as you are true to yourself.

True love. God commands us to offer true love. Getting back to our current situation, what does true love look like? I have a couple stories to share. The first is about a group of women I heard about some years ago who came together for a series of dialogues on abortion. The tension was that half the group was pro-choice. The other half was pro-life. They agreed not to try and change each other's view. They agreed to listen to each other. Before they met, women on both sides thought they were going to hate the ones they disagreed with. They expected to have nothing in common whatsoever. To their surprise, the women found they had a lot in common. The more they met, the more they found they could not only tolerate each other, they came to care about each other. No one changed their position on abortion or choice but they did change their perception of the other. Even though they disagreed, they found a way to love each other as neighbors through being honest and through being devoted, staying connected even when it was

hard. True love. True to each other. True to themselves.

Another story is about a man named Larry Ward, whose mother died unexpectedly. After the funeral, Larry's father shut himself in his house and refused to see anyone, including his own children. Larry, who was dealing with his own grief, struggled with how to love his father who insisted on rejecting him and everyone else. Larry, a Baptist minister, had also been studying with a Buddhist teacher, Thich Nhat Hahn, and had learned about the power of simply being present with someone in the midst of pain and suffering. Although his father would not allow him to be physically in the house, Larry would bring flowers and letters to the front door. He would sit on the doorstep and wait for his father to open up. Larry sent flowers and letters to his father for 6 months. He tried not to get angry with his father but instead focused on simply being present and compassionate. One day after about 6 months, Larry brought some more flowers and a letter to the house. His father opened the door of his home and the door of his heart. Larry remained loyal to his father by being there. He also remained honest to himself and his father by refusing to believe the lie that his father's grief was a rejection. He saw the honest truth that his father was in pain, and for six long months he reached out to him rather than taking it personally. True love opens doors and hearts.

True love shows up to seek a deeper truth. True love is willing to listen and talk even when it seems to make no sense. True love, devoted and honest love, is love that is willing to stay connected. True love is creative in making the connection real. It is true love that we are commanded to show God with all our heart and soul and strength. It is true love that we are to show our neighbors and ourselves. As Jesus links these two commandments, it seems like he is telling the pharisees that in order to love God they have to also love their neighbor as themselves. It is not enough to love heavenward. We also have to love earthward.

The pharisees did not get it. They were so focused on being right that they forgot to love. Perhaps Matthew was not simply attacking them as much as he was trying to get them to understand. We may not have the patience of Larry or those women who were willing to sit down and talk about abortion together. We may want to scream at our neighbor. Maybe the first step toward loving our neighbor as ourself is just to remember that being right is not the whole picture. If we are right but do not love, we miss the boat. True love does not mean that we give up our point of view. True love for our neighbor and ourselves means that we are devoted enough to our neighbor to share our truth in ways that build a connection. I say to my neighbor, "Neighbor... I am devoted to you. I am going to show up for our relationship, even though it may not seem like we have a relationship. I may really like you, or I may not understand you at all. In any case, I'm here. I'm present. In addition, I'm going to be honest with you. I won't hold a grudge or look to punish you, but I will tell you the truth. I will tell you the truth not to prove right or wrong but to open the door so that both of us might discover the truth that is bigger than both of us. In fact, I need you to help me see that bigger truth. I need you to help me see God."

In this season of tension, in this season of political and financial uncertainty, we need each other to see God. We need each other, and true love will be difficult. True love for God, true love for neighbor, true love for ourselves...it is going to be hard to be devoted and honest to anyone when we're in the swirl of so much anxiety. This morning, though, we're here to practice true love with each other. True love might mean having a difficult conversation where we stumble around in confusion. True love might mean sending flowers and notes of encouragement to someone who refuses to connect with us. This morning, true love means gathering around a table with

friends and strangers in this room and with friends and strangers in rooms all around the world to offer all that we have, all our heart, soul, and strength, and give thanks. This act of thanksgiving in community is our practice. We need each other. Republicans need democrats. United States citizens need the citizens of the world. Joe the plumber needs Jose the farmworker. And we all need to practice true love. Thank you for showing up for practice this morning!

On November 5, the day after the election, how will we practice true love? How will we practice needing each other? How will we practice devotion and honesty to God, to our neighbors, and to ourselves? How might God be working in us to create an opportunity to reach across the street? How might God be working in us so that together we might reach across the political, the economic, the cultural divides that keep us apart? Between now and Nov. 4, many of us will show up to vote. God invites us, commands us between now and the rest of our lives to show up to love. Show up for practice. Practice devotion that goes beyond the bonds of affection or the bounds of comfort. Practice honesty that leads to the truth beyond our understanding. Practice true love. And God, who truly loves us, will use our practice to make us perfect.