

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, Leviticus 19:18 and Matthew 22:34-40

“The greatest commandment”

Jesus was incredibly consistent in his teachings. No matter what was happening in the world around him, his teachings didn't change to adapt to or fit into the culture or the society in which he was living. When history unfolds before us we often think that we have to pivot in the way in which we interact with people or situations, or life in general. But the changes of this world ought not to change our approach to life, faith, family, those things that are most important. Everything else can slip away, our ideological beliefs, our political stances, but the Word of the Lord never changes, it remains the same.

Now we change and so we think God's Word needs to change with us because when we see the world differently and God's Word continues to say the same thing, well, then we get a bit bent out of shape and think that we have to shape and shift God's Word into the changes that we see happening around us. This past week we remembered 9/11 which I believe changed our culture and society. We were taught to hate the terrorist. That word, terrorist, was rarely used before that day, now it is the *nom de jure* on any of our enemies.

But we don't see any justification in Scripture for hating anyone, but even Christians and churches wink at the thought of hating and defeating the terrorist in ways that Jesus would never have imagined saying. Karl Barth, my favorite theologian who lived before and after WWII when he was asked about the war would respond that his preaching and his teaching never changed. The atrocities of the holocaust remained atrocities and remained that which the church ought to speak out against.

What is most important in the eyes of God does not change based upon what is happening in our own life and in our world. I'm saying that as if I know what is most important to God. Well, that's where we find ourselves today is Jesus addressing the most important commandments in all of Scripture which has not changed from the first century to now. What we have been doing these past years in the Gospel of Matthew is trying to equip all of us with what we need in order to be a follower of Jesus. This emphasis on the Gospel of Righteousness is so that as Paul states, we would all be made mature in our following of our Savior.

Today, Jesus tells us what is the singular, most important thing for his disciples, for his followers, for his church, and that has never changed. Let's read.

READ

The command to love God and to love our neighbor is not new, we see it in both of our Scriptures today. When Jesus says love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind we should all be thinking of one of the most important pillars in Jewish thought. Deuteronomy 6:4 and following is called the Shema because the words in Hebrew that it begins with, Hear oh Israel is Shema Ishraele. These verses which command us to not only love God but to pass that love onto our children and all future generations was recited by individuals and families at home a few times a day. We don't have that practice at home of reciting Scripture together, but this is what Jesus would have done as a child and all of those around him would have memorized and a few times a day said these verses to burn them in their minds.

When he then goes on and speaks about loving neighbor, that is also not new, but it certainly was not a Scripture that households would recite repeatedly throughout the day. It was known, but it wasn't the all star Scripture like the Deuteronomy one was. Loving neighbor seemed a bit like the stereotypical overlooked step child Scripture, like Cinderella who was relegated to the menial tasks because she wasn't considered good enough to be with the others, but then once she is discovered became the shining star.

Back in February of 1994 I was examined on the floor of the West Jersey Presbytery for ordination. It was a room filled with about 300 people all looking for an opportunity to trip up this young final year seminary student. The first question I was asked was which is the most important in your life: Love God or love neighbor. I hesitated, but only briefly, and responded I cannot separate the two because they belong together. The person insisted and stated you must separate the two in order to answer my question, which is the most important. I stated if my Savior was not able to separate the two then what makes us think that I might be able to separate the two. The person wasn't happy, voted against me, but I passed.

We have a desire to separate these two pillars of Christian ethics and thought to discover which one are we to lean into the most, loving God or loving our neighbor. There are 613 laws in the Old Testament. 248 of them are positive laws, thou shalt, and 365 negative ones, thou shalt not. In Jesus' day they separated what they called heavy commandments like Deuteronomy 5:16 which states that we are to honor our parents. From what they called the light commandments like Deuteronomy 22:6-7 about what we are to do with a birds nest when the mother is present. Both had to be obeyed and to be taken seriously. But there were differences.

Jesus' words today describe to us exactly why both of these commandments were heavy and had to be taken with exactly the same equal weight. When we talk about loving God and loving neighbor a common way to look at it, and I actually agree with this, is the importance of having a vertical relationship that is healthy and a horizontal relationship that is healthy. What does a vertical and a horizontal bar create? A cross, that's right. So the vertical relationship is what Jesus begins with, but which does not make it the most important, just the first. That is our relationship with God. This vertical relationship comes first because it is God who first loved us and created us and shaped us from the dust and mud of the ground. It comes first as a matter of chronology and not as a matter of importance. We love God because he first loved us before anyone could ever love us, even while, as the Psalm states, we were in the womb of our mothers.

The second piece of this cross is the horizontal relationship, that which stretches out across this earth and which has the most impact on those with whom we come into contact. This horizontal relationship of loving our neighbor is not relegated to our families, to our church, to our county, to our country. The horizon of God stretches across the world and requires our perspective to do the same. The shorter our love is, the less we are willing to include our enemies and those who are not like us and those who don't think like us, the less we are able to love God as well.

Look at vs.40 where Jesus says something very important that is lost in the English. He says upon these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. Everything that God is trying to teach us through his Holy Word and through the people who are sent by him, hangs on loving God and loving neighbor. Let's look at that word hang that Jesus uses.

That word hang specifically denotes a weight that is held up by two ropes on either end. This is crucial, because if you lift up one rope too much, it can spill the whole thing over. If you don't lift up the other enough, well then it can fall out and be ruined. There is never a situation in our life that allows us only to love God and not to love our neighbor. Never. This is righteousness folks, acting according to the will of God.

It is so interesting to me how what loving God means to people in the church and how that has changed over time, even though God has never changed and his commandments have never changed. We often think that loving God is being good. We love God by being a good person, going to church regularly, being a good citizen. Loving God means, we think, not

cursing or drinking too much, being charitable and not too grumpy. But loving God is not about checking off good deeds, it is about loving our neighbor.

If we don't love our neighbor, if we choose to hate our neighbor, to create division, to pursue our own interests that outside of the kingdom of God but will build up a kingdom for ourselves here on this earth, if we strive to see our own interests over the interests of others, well, elsewhere Jesus makes clear that those who choose to do this are living by the sword, and those who live by the sword will die by the sword. You can't say I am obeying God, going to church, respecting my wife and my husband and then tell people to hate their neighbor and think that you are loving God. That is not how it works.

Loving your neighbor doesn't mean that you have to have a warm affection for those around us. No, loving God implies obedience to God and service to neighbor. Love for neighbor means acting toward others with their goal in mind and not our selfish motives. You see why this isn't a popular approach in our culture. You see why churches don't really describe this as being the most important commandment? Because churches on both sides of the aisle have been caught up in hating each other and have forgotten Jesus washing the feet of his disciples and washing their feet, these people who would deny him and leave him hanging on a cross alone. Jesus demonstrated what it means to love our neighbor by washing the feet of those who were disloyal to him and to his cause. This is the way of the church that has never changed, except when the church has changed with the world and taken sides.

I want to leave you today with a few Scriptures that we can read together and that you can take home with you and when you feel angry because someone on the other side of the aisle has said or done something stupid, say them out loud. This doesn't mean that the church doesn't pursue righteousness, we do, and we do it fervently, but we don't interact with our neighbors, or our enemies, in a way that is inconsistent with Scripture. Romans 13:9-10, Galatians 5:13-14, James 2:8, I John 4:19-21.

These are the words that sow peace and healing. Amen.