

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

Now this is the commandment—the statutes and the ordinances—that the Lord your God charged me to teach you to observe in the land that you are about to cross into and occupy, ²so that you and your children and your children’s children, may fear the Lord your God all the days of your life, and keep all his decrees and his commandments that I am commanding you, so that your days may be long. ³Hear therefore, O Israel, and observe them diligently, so that it may go well with you, and so that you may multiply greatly in a land flowing with milk and honey, as the Lord, the God of your ancestors, has promised you.

⁴Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. ⁵You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. ⁶Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. ⁷Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. ⁸Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, ⁹and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.

Matthew 22:34-40

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹and a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Loving God, Loving Neighbor

It was 25 years ago on this Halloween weekend that I proposed to Anna. At the time I was serving as the Director of Music at First Presbyterian Church in Boone. Anna and I had been dating for a few months and even though I had two teenage daughters, she was still dating me, or us. It was Sunday morning the day after Halloween and Anna was in church with her mother and one of her sisters. I had a couple announcements to make that morning because we were trying to raise some funds to purchase a grand piano for the sanctuary. As long as I was had the floor, I asked Anna if she would stand. I asked her in front of all those witnesses and my children if she would marry me. She told me later that her sister had just asked her how things were going with us and she said she didn’t think they were moving very fast. Anna was so surprised by my proposal that all she could do was nod her head, and I think, she blurted out a “Yes”. Needless to say the poor minister got upstaged that day and I don’t even remember what was said after that.

Our reading today has me thinking about love. Not only the love we have for one another but our love for God. And since it is a 5th Sunday where we often do some different things, I thought we might share some thoughts about loving God and our neighbors with both music and stories. These may be a little disjointed but that’s just how my week has been, so I hope you can follow me.

How do I love God? Or as one of my commentaries said, “What is it to love God whole-lifedly?” Now I know the obvious answer of course is, to love my neighbor as myself. To love the things that God loves, to do mercy and compassion. To seek justice for all and live a life that exemplifies all these things. In Luke’s version of this story, Jesus goes on to tell the story of the Good Samaritan just to emphasize that very point. I get that. I try to do that. But what about the love part? If I am honest I don’t always have feelings of love for God. And I am also sometimes wary of those who say they do. Just being honest. But how did I, we, get into this relationship with God if some sort of romantic or brotherly/sisterly love wasn’t somewhere at the beginning?

I love my wife and because of that, I live in such a way as to demonstrate that love, but there's more to it than that, isn't there? I mean at one time we were just crazy, over the moon, IN LOVE. And sure, that high often becomes something deeper and not necessarily about feelings, but feelings are still a part of our love even to this day. So, it causes me to consider, how do I love God? Is it alright to have these feelings about God and why are we so afraid to talk about that? How do you feel about letting God know that you love him? Now I know you may be getting a little nervous right now. We have all encountered people who just can't stop talking or singing about, "How much they love Jesus." We often roll our eyes and think "These people are just a little crazy!" Our love is so much more mature than that! And yet, when I turn to the psalms I hear a very emotional kind of love for God.

The Psalms are full of deep yearning and passion. They are joyful, exalted, mournful, full of longing, hopeful. These are love letters, not some intellectual expression. Just listen to Psalm 42 which begins like this: "As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God. My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When shall I come and behold the face of God? My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?" Or Psalm 63 where David cries out "O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water. So I have looked upon you in the sanctuary, beholding your power and glory. Because your steadfast love is better than life, my lips will praise you. So I will bless you as long as I live; I will lift up my hands and call on your name. My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast, and my mouth praises you with joyful lips when I think of you on my bed, and meditate on you in the watches of the night; for you have been my help, and in the shadow of your wings I sing for joy." Makes you want to write your own psalm of praise, doesn't it?

Even some of the Christian Mystics wrote beautiful poems about their love of God. ST. Ignatius of Loyola who was a Spanish priest and theologian and the founder of the Jesuit order wrote this poem called ***Just Because You are My God.***

*Oh, my God, I want to love you
Not that I might gain eternal heaven
Nor escape eternal hell
But, Lord, to love you just because you are my God.
Grant me to give to you
And not to count the cost,
To fight for you
And not to mind the wounds,
To labor and to ask for no reward
Except the knowledge
That I serve my God.*

These are deeply passionate and moving words, I think, that speaks of a love that has endured the test of time. And loving God can take a lifetime, and what I felt at the beginning of this relationship has grown and changed over time. Sort of like my love for Anna which is based on my very human understanding of these things. I can't help but think of the many car rides where we hardly speak a word. Not because we don't speak to each other, but because after years of relationship, of living out our love for one another, we don't need to speak all the time. We often travel with a quiet understanding and knowing, occasionally reaching over and holding hands, a smile about an inside joke, laughter, or even a tear. Love looks like that sometimes. And my relationship with God is like that too, particularly at this stage of our life together. God and I have been in love for a long time now. At first, it was all talking and praising and newness, not unlike first loves that we all remember. But over time our love has deepened, and we don't have to always be talking to know that we are

present. Not that we don't talk, but more often than not, we share a lot of quiet moments. Sometimes we hold hands or share a smile, a sigh, an inside joke, or even a tear. Love is funny that way.

There is an obscure little musical called "Carnival" that was written back in 1961 that features a song that you don't hear very often anymore, except as background music in the elevator. It goes like this, "*Love makes the world go 'round, love makes the world go 'round, somebody soon will love you, if no one loves you now. High in some silent sky, Love sings a silver song, Making the earth Whirl softly, Love makes the world go 'round.*"

What is the greatest commandment? I found myself wondering why they asked Jesus this question today. Why is this such an important question that they would hope to trip him up on it? Are they trying to determine if he is some kind of heretic or zealot? I'm pretty sure any faithful Jew should be able to answer this question the way Jesus did. So why now? I have a couple of thoughts about that. One is that maybe Matthew is making a statement to his readers about the freedom that comes from following Jesus. That the religious laws that have governed and guided their lives are not the only way to love God. That religious rules and laws sometimes become obstacles to a loving relationship with God or with anyone really. When following rules becomes more important than true worship or joyful living then there might be a reason to question those rules.

Secondly, I think this story highlights that as far as Jesus is concerned, *Love does make the world go 'round*. Love for God and love for neighbor is what this life of faith is all about and if you miss that, then you miss the joy of being in a relationship with the Living, Loving, God.

I am also wondering if this is our question as well. How do we answer this question? When asked about your faith or beliefs, how do you respond? When someone asks about the hope that lies within you do you talk about loving God or about certain rules or words that someone has to say in order to find salvation? Christians often tell others that they need to accept Jesus as their personal savior, and they need to believe certain things about salvation and sin. And some of that may be true and needed. But how often have you heard someone ask, "What is the greatest commandment?" And this is what some often miss about Jesus. Jesus doesn't tell people that they need to believe in him or love him or build a church in his name, or anything about himself. Jesus consistently points people to God. To love God and love your neighbor. And how did Jesus love God? By loving those whom God gave him. By being obedient and trusting. Loving what God loves. Giving his life to others, even dying to show his trust and faith in God's greater love for all the world.

Every Sunday morning when I drive down from Banner Elk, I listen to a program on WNCW called 'The Gospel Truth.' It's a program where they play all kinds of bluegrass gospel music and it often lifts my spirits. A song I recently heard that I'll leave you with today is called, *You Don't Love God If You Don't Love Your Neighbor*, which reminded me of Jesus' words this morning where he tells us the same. It was made popular by singer Ronda Vincent and it goes like this. Here is a link if you are interested.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WMPZ-hvwqwg&list=RDWMPZ-hvwqwg>

*There are many people, who will say they're Christians
And they live like Christians on the Sabbath day
But come Monday morning, till the coming Sunday
They will fight their neighbor all along the way*

Refrain:

*Oh you don't love God
If you don't love your neighbor
If you gossip about him, if you never have mercy
If he gets into trouble, and you don't try to help him*

*Then you don't love your neighbor
And you don't love God*

*In the holy Bible, in the book of Matthew
Read the 18th chapter in the 21st verse
Jesus plainly tells us that we must have mercy
There's a special warning in the 35th verse
Refrain:*

*There's a God Almighty, and you've got to love him
If you want salvation and a home on high
If you say you love him while you hate your neighbor
Then you don't have religion, you just told a lie*

*Oh you don't love God
If you don't love your neighbor
If you gossip about him, if you never have mercy
If he gets into trouble, and you don't try to help him
Then you don't love your neighbor
And you don't love god
Then you don't love your neighbor
And you don't love god*

Songwriters: SHORTY SULLIVAN, THOMAS COLEY