For those of us who have been reading the devotional book “Extravagant Generosity,” it has become clear that the author makes a strong connection between our love of God and our generosity not only of money but of spirit. To love God with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength is to have the whole of our lives oriented in the direction of God’s love, it is to recognize that all we have and are and ever will be is because of God’s love. That recognition alone should be more than enough to cause us to open our hands and hearts in generosity.

This generosity is the key to the inseparability between the commandment to love God and love neighbor. The second commandment, says Jesus, is “like” the first. “It gives it focus and pinpoints the way in which the love of God can find practical expression.” You remember the words of 1 John: “Those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen. A failure to honor the second commandment while claiming to observe the first makes the claim to honor the first ring hollow.

We need desperately in our nation to have a conversation about this shared heritage that recognizes the deep need for love and concern for our neighbor. It was so gratifying to see that concern on display in Shelbyville and Murfreesboro yesterday as the citizens of those towns gave a positive witness and spoke out against hate. We can only pray that those might be the beginning of conversations that help bridge the things that divide us as we affirm the heart of the law – love God with all you have, and love your neighbor as yourself.

Which commandment in the law is the greatest? It is an important question, important enough that it occurs in Matthew, Mark, and Luke. Each of them frame it differently. In Luke, the question comes from sincerity. But here, it is presented as a test. It is intended to trap Jesus into elevating one law above any others, which would immediately embroil him in an age-old debate that has no winners.
The reason the debate had no winners was at least in part the sheer number of laws. Moses came down the mountain with ten commandments, but by the time of Jesus that number had expanded to 613. Depending upon your place in Jewish life – whether you were a Pharisee or a Sadducee, a revolutionary Zealot or any one of many groups in Judaism, you had your own set of greatest commandments. For Jesus to insert himself into that conversation invites his own rejection by any number of these groups.

Yet, even so, it is an important question, important enough that Jesus takes the risk of providing an answer. He seems to understand something is at stake in how we respond to this question, something fundamental to how we live, how we give of ourselves, our posture in the world.

We can get into situations where it would be helpful to know a quick summation of what is most important. A few years ago, my friend John found himself in an ethical quandary. “He had forgotten his Panera rewards card, and the cashier offered to key in his phone number, which he gladly accepted. He called out his phone number, but since it was the house phone, it not only pulled up his rewards status, but also his wife's.

“That's when he got the news. ‘You have nothing--no rewards. But your wife has a free pastry.’

“And the internal struggle began. Should he leave her reward alone? Or, since those things do expire eventually, should he avoid the potential loss of a hard-earned reward (albeit the hard work being done by another)?

“And he began to go through all the possible implications of what his choice would ultimately mean.

“He decided to heed the advice of the father of the Reformation, Martin Luther, who said, ‘If you're going to sin, sin boldly.’ I wonder how that worked out for him.

John, in reflecting on that story, said, “Life is filled with those sorts of moments, isn't it? Moments made difficult because we are seeking to be faithful to God in the midst of our living."1

I think that might be what was driving the question that Jesus had to answer: "Which commandment is the greatest?" In other words, life presents us with so many

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1 I thank my friend John Leggett for sharing this story with me, and his reflections on its meaning for this text.
variables and options and choices that we need someone to distill for us what we should absolutely do above all else.

Jesus goes back into the tradition and joins together Deuteronomy 6:5, “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength,” and Leviticus 19:18, “Love your neighbor as you love yourself.” He announces for all to hear that “on these two hang all the law and the prophets.” Against the Pharisees, who argued for purity through observance of all 613 laws, and laid down strict codes for their enforcement, Jesus proclaims that purity comes through “the weightier matters of the law,” or “the spirit of the law,” which are justice, mercy, and faith.

The law is summarized in love. But Jesus carefully reminds us that love for God is only one part of the law – of equal value is love of neighbor. Jesus spends his entire ministry helping his followers widen their notion of neighbor – the neighborhood includes gentiles as well as Jews, the rich and poor alike, women as well as men, slave and free, children alongside adults, sinners and righteous. The spirit of the law is this love that knows no bounds.

And it is that love of God which inspires all acts of human love. Jesus silences the Pharisees because they know in the end he is correct. Love is the thing that lies beneath all the laws of God, and any attempt to enforce an interpretation of God’s law that fails the law of love is in the end a false or incomplete interpretation.

Martin Luther and John Calvin and John Knox all dared to tell the reigning religious institution of their day that they were failing in the law of love, and they lifted high the central theme of the scripture – the grace of God, the love of God, which we cannot earn, which we cannot lose, and which makes possible all our living and all our loving.

It seems altogether appropriate that the Sunday we celebrate the Reformation almost always falls during a season when we are thinking and praying about generosity and about the ministry plans for our church in the coming year. As most of you know, one of the biggest motivators of the Reformation was the very question of giving. Martin Luther observed that the Roman Catholic Church of his day had abused the generosity of the people and turned giving into a kind of transaction between the giver and God. Luther, and John Calvin after him, said that giving should not be to earn God’s grace or assure your place or the place of your relatives in heaven, but rather was always in response to God’s grace.
The Reformers did teach what we encourage today – that followers of Jesus Christ give a tithe, or give a proportional amount of what they earn – but they saw it not as a transaction. It was a spiritual discipline. It was a concrete way of showing love for God in response to God’s love and love for neighbor in supporting ministries that bring life and wholeness and good news to all. And beyond that, it was a practice that helped followers of Christ keep their possessions in the proper perspective in recognition that God cares not just what we do with ten percent of our income, but all of it. Our earning, saving, spending, and giving matters to God, and makes a difference in the kind of people we are.

One of the most moving and challenging parts of the devotion book we are reading together as a congregation, “Practicing Extravagant Generosity,” is the author’s repeated reminders that generosity is an aspect of character. He writes, “It’s an attractive quality which I aspire to and desire to see cultivated in my children…No stories from Scripture tell of people living the God-related life while fostering a greedy attitude. Generosity extends beyond merely the use of money, although it most definitely includes that. There are generous spirits; generous souls, people who are generous with their time, with their teaching, with their love. Generosity is a fruit of the Spirit.” We know generosity when we see it.

This rings so true to me as a pastor in this congregation. Since 1811, generation after generation, in the spirit of the Reformation, have been so generous in so many ways, that we stand here, 206 years later, the beneficiaries of their response to God’s grace. And, speaking personally, both of my children lived the biggest part of their lives of faith being nurtured by and witnessing the generosity of this congregation. I cannot begin to tell you how gratifying it was to see my son stand up after his wedding in this sanctuary and give thanks for this community of faith with such joy and authenticity. I see in the kind of human beings they are and are becoming, I see in the care and love they show, I see in their generosity the influence and impact of your generosity. Words fail me to say how thankful I am.

And so the Reformation continues in our time. Future generations will know the impact of our witness, our giving, our generosity, all to the glory of God. It really does all boil down to those simple words that take a lifetime to live – love God, love your neighbor.

As we go out into a world longing for authentic love, may this be our guiding light. Amen.