

“Love One Another”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church - Indianapolis, Indiana
October 16, 2011

Matthew 22: 34-46

This passage is one of the most familiar of all Bible passages. It is often quoted in our life as the church, for it reminds us of the simple yet explicit commandment which should guide us as children of God. As we look at this scripture closely once again today, I would invite us to consider how all that surrounds it - the context, the structure, and the additional verses at the conclusion - might speak to us in fresh ways this morning. For to truly love our neighbor as ourselves, we must be able to first love God fully and completely, without any reservation or lack of self-sacrifice.

First, consider the context of this passage from Matthew. It is Chapter 22, and we are in the early stages of Holy Week. Jesus has entered the holy city of Jerusalem, he has made a scene with the cleansing of the temple (21:12-17), and now he faces the challenges of the religious power brokers. I don't think you would call the Sadducees and Pharisees the biggest fans of Jesus. Any chance they got, they were trying to trick him or make him say something so obviously bad that they could shut him up and not allow him to spread his nonsense anymore.

The Sadducees were the most fundamentalist lot of them all. They believed that the Pentateuch - the first five books of the Old Testament - that this was the only guide of the Jewish people. If it wasn't found in these first five books which Moses wrote, then they didn't believe in it. That is why they were so hung up on Jesus' teachings about the resurrection from the dead. Immediately before the passage we have read this morning, the Sadducees use an example from the book of Deuteronomy to try and trick Jesus. They speak of a man who died childless, and that Scripture says the man's brother should marry his widow, so that the family's name and bloodline might be maintained here on earth. The Sadducees turn it into a riddle, claiming that if all the man's brothers die after each had married the widow, and then the woman dies, "in the resurrection, then, whose wife of the seven will she be?" (22:28)

The Sadducees want to use Scripture to entrap so that they might hold on to their power, whereas Jesus opens God's Word to the power of the Holy Spirit to free people to serve God. He states that what has happened here on earth matters not once you are dead; for such mortal institutions do not exist in heaven. For the God of our ancestors - of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob - "he is God not of the dead, but of the living." Jesus seeks not to manipulate Scripture, but to allow God's Spirit to speak through Scripture and free his followers for service.

"When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together . . ." (22:34). The Pharisees were concerned with the law, how it was interpreted and made applicable to the Jewish people's lives. They were the guardians, if you will, of the Jewish worship and tradition, and although they weren't as fundamentalist as the Sadducees, they too were not happy with how Jesus went

about his business. To test him, they sent one of their brightest and shrewdest, a lawyer, to try and test him.

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus responds first by quoting Deuteronomy 6:5, a passage called “the Shema,” which was central to the Jewish worship and liturgy: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” We are to love God with everything which we have, and the first four of the Ten Commandments reflect this understanding: no other gods, no idols, do not take the Lord’s name in vain, and keep the Sabbath day holy. But what Jesus says next likely surprised the Pharisees: “A second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” We usually think this is one Jesus made up himself, but he actually quotes directly from Leviticus 19:18, part of the Pentateuch, as well. He does not say that this second commandment is less than the first; he only says it is “like it.” To love your neighbor as yourself may also be found in the last six of the Ten Commandments, for those reflect how we show our love for God through our human relationships.

“On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” These are not quick and easy summaries which don’t mean anything. These two commands are the essence of being children of God. Everything which has been written by the historians, which has been spoken by the prophets, which has been sung about in the psalms – they are all dependent on loving God and loving one another. There is no middle ground. It is all or nothing.

And then Jesus decides to turn the tables and ask the Pharisees a question. “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?” When they respond, “the son of David,” Jesus challenges their long-held assumptions with Scripture itself. Jesus quotes directly Psalm 110, which is attributed to David himself, who writes, “The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet.’” If the son of David is the presumed Messiah, as the Pharisees insist, then, Jesus asks, why would David himself call his own son “Lord?”

Not only has Jesus stated the commandments by which we live our lives of discipleship, but also he has reaffirmed his role as the one sent by God to save God’s people. The one whom even King David spoke of in the Psalms is standing there in their midst. He is not only the one who teaches and transcends the law, he is also the one who fulfills the prophecy spoken of in the law, and throughout the remaining days of that week he will bring to fruition the promise of God’s love.

Ultimately, this passage reminds us that to love one another, we must first love the Lord our God. Tim Beach-Verhey writes: *These two Scripture passages together provide a summary of Jesus’ mission and ministry. In quoting the Shema, Jesus points out that the aim of the law is to orient one’s entire life toward God. However, one cannot love God without loving what God loves! One cannot love God and oppress or exclude any of God’s creatures – even one’s enemies. While the scribes and Pharisees used the law to place severe limits on those whom they were obliged to recognize as their neighbors, Jesus joins these texts in order to smash all the limits and boundaries of neighborliness.*

As Jesus pointed out in his Sermon on the Mount, “God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). Therefore, one who truly loves God will also love his or her enemies. To love God is to love in the way that God loves – indiscriminately. To love God is to

love what God loves – everything. Because God is the source of all being, and God loves all God’s creatures, “true virtue most essentially consists,” according to Jonathan Edwards, “in benevolence to being in general” (Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 4, Westminster/John Knox Press, Louisville, © 2011: 214).

One of the ways we show “benevolence to being in general” is understanding that all that we have is a gift from God. That includes the one topic which Jesus spoke of more than anything else: our money. In two Sundays we will bring to God our pledges of commitment for the next year on Stewardship Sunday. As we consider how we will support the church’s ministry and mission in 2012, how do the choices we make each day reflect our love of God and love of our neighbor? A minister I respect a great deal wrote the following:

God calls us to use our money in ways that reflect God’s love. In worship we offer some of our money to do God’s work through the church. In worship we pray that God will guide us to use all of our money as faithful disciples of Jesus Christ . . . We’re called to examine our use of money as individuals and as families. Do our check registers show our love for God and for other people in the same way they show care for ourselves?

All of us are called to be faithful stewards, using our time, talents, and money to express love for God and love for other people. The biblical guidelines for our use of money include these: Give in proportion to what you receive. Give with the assurance that God will provide all that you need. Establish a plan for giving and stick with it. Whatever you give, give with a glad and generous spirit.

To paraphrase Jesus’ words: “Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and with all your money. You shall love your neighbor as yourself” (W. F. Mansell, Jr., “Ministry of Money,” November 2, 2003).

I’ll conclude by sharing some thoughts a pastor wrote in yesterday’s *Indianapolis Star*:

“Jesus was keenly aware that as human beings, we have a great need to possess money and belongings as a means of raising our self-worth. As Christians, we are challenged on two fronts. First, do we see our possessions as blessings from God, not as rewards for our own achievements? Second, do we view these resources as a way to further God’s kingdom here on earth, rather than serving our own self-interests?

“We are called as children of God to use all that we have to strengthen the community as a whole. The Old and New Testaments speak to this imperative, when we are told that to love God with all of our heart, soul, and mind is as important as loving our neighbor as ourselves. If we are to truly honor God, then we are to view our money, possessions, and time as tools for improving the lives of those with less. It does not matter whether we are rich and comfortable, struggling to work, or somewhere in between – how we utilize our resources speaks directly to how we view God’s activity and claim on our lives” (Frank Mansell III, “Faith Forum,” *Indianapolis Star*, October 16, 2011).

May we love as God loves: graciously and abundantly. May we give as God gives: sacrificially and completely. May we live as Christ lived: lifting up the broken-hearted, and bringing God’s peace to a broken world.

Thanks be to God. Amen.