

“Love One Another”
A Sermon Preached by Frank Mansell III
John Knox Presbyterian Church – Indianapolis, Indiana
October 25, 2020

Matthew 22: 34-40

Over the last several weeks, I’ve been taking an online class through the Lake Institute on Faith and Giving, based here in Indianapolis. The class focuses on fundraising and stewardship in a religious context, and it’s been very helpful for me to interact and learn from other pastors and leaders across the country.

This past week, we were asked to do an exercise called a “Case Study.” A case study is where you make the case for your organization – what is its purpose and mission, how it makes a difference in the lives of others, and why it is valuable for people to support it with their time and resources. I found it to be very helpful for me to sit down over the course of an hour and work through those questions as it relates to our mission and ministry here at John Knox. And don’t be surprised if over the course of the next few weeks you hear more about what makes our case so compelling as an Open. Caring. Community.

But as I read this very familiar passage from Matthew, I could not help but think that this is Jesus’ case study for being one of his disciples. When all else fails, when you are struggling and don’t know where else to turn or what else to do – love the Lord your God with all your being. And when you’re not sure how to do that, look at your neighbor and love him or her as if he or she is you. For in modelling such love, we are showing others what love God has for them, and in doing so, we can change people’s lives through the light of Christ that shines in each of us.

This passage is so familiar to many of us that it might help us to first consider its context in the Gospel of Matthew. It is Chapter 22, and we are actually 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 for 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 as we talked about a few weeks ago, 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.

But how do we put that into practice? When someone frustrates us or hurts us or lets us down, how do we love our neighbor as ourselves? When we feel like God has let us down, or was not there for us in the way we had hoped, how do we love God with all our being? Audrey West writes:

A couple of months ago I stumbled across a clue (to answer these questions), illustrated by a short video about archery. It begins with a young man gently tossing a six-inch wooden disk into the air above his head. Seconds later an arrow speeds its way into the face of the disk, fracturing the wood into pieces that scatter on the ground beside the man’s feet. A high-speed camera,

replayed in slow motion, captures the arrow's impact nearly dead center in the disk.

The next target is a two-and-a-half-inch plastic ball. Again, the young man tosses it into the air. Again, the arrow launches toward its target and hits it nearly on center. Whether viewed in real time or in slow motion, the evidence is clear.

The archer's arrow flies three more times, each time into an ever-smaller target: a golf ball, then a Life Saver candy, and finally an aspirin tablet. In each case the arrow goes straight to the mark, even when the target is no larger than the diameter of the arrow itself.

When the show's host asks how it is possible to shoot an arrow so accurately using a handmade bow, especially when the target seems so small, the archer replies: "The center of an aspirin is exactly the same size as the center of a beach ball. Always aim for the center."

When Jesus responds to the lawyer's question, he does exactly that: he aims for the center, straight into the heart of their shared sacred scriptures. His answer lands in Deuteronomy, at the Shema, God's purpose statement for God's people: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." "And," Jesus adds, quoting from Leviticus this time, "love your neighbor as yourself."

There it is, the center of the target, recalled from the Old Testament and proclaimed anew by God's own Messiah.

*Do you want to know how to love God with your whole self? Practice loving your neighbor. Do you want to know how to love your neighbor? Practice loving God. Repeat. Then do it again (Audrey West, [*The Christian Century*](#), October 7, 2020: 21).*

I'll admit, it's very hard sometimes to keep practicing aiming for the center of this target. We're called to love our neighbor as ourselves, even when our neighbor holds the complete opposite political or cultural viewpoint as us. We're called to love our neighbor as ourselves, even when our neighbor causes us pain or refuses to forgive. We're called to love God with all of our being, even when our prayers seem to fall on deaf ears, as our loved one becomes sicker, our dreams suddenly are dashed, or there is no apparent end to the brokenness of our world. How do we continue to practice aiming for the center when it can be so hard to believe our arrows are ever hitting their target?

As hard as it may be, I think we just keep practicing and aiming for the center. We allow ourselves to be vulnerable – no matter how hard or how much that opens us up to potential pain – and we keep inviting God's grace into the relationships we treasure most. We lift our heads up and look at the neighbors who have the political sign in their yard which makes our blood boil, and we ask how their family is doing. We turn to God when we are suffering and despondent, praying for small signs of hope, and then have the eyes and ears and hearts and minds to recognize those signs around us. We just keep practicing aiming for the center of that target of loving God and our neighbor.

And part of that practice relates to what we do with the gifts God has given to us as disciples of Jesus Christ. My father once said in a sermon 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).

*Let me close with a story about Mother Teresa which I read as part of my class last week. She is caring for the dying in Calcutta, and there is one man who resents her care, spits in her face when she tries to administer medicine and comfort. This contentious relationship carries on for days, as the man, with no family or friends, lies dying. And still Mother Teresa comes to him, washes him, feeds him, extends her compassion. He argues with her, tells her he does not believe in God, he does not believe in human kindness. He wants to be left alone to die alone. He is angry, bitter, demoralized, radically ungrateful. And still she comes to him that he might have dignity in his final days. She cleans his own filth, dresses him in fresh clothes, spoons broth into his mouth. Weakly he tries to swat her hands away, admonishes her for her care. Until, frightened, knowing these are the final hours of his life, he leans into her arms as she holds him, looks up at her, and begs of her, "Please. Is your God like you?" (*Imagining Abundance*, Kerry Alys Robinson, Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, © 2014: 39).*

As we keep aiming for the center of the target, may we trust that God is with us – for when we love one another, we are loving God. And when we love God, we are loving our neighbor.

Thanks be to God. Amen.