

For the Love of God

Matthew 22:34-46
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First Presbyterian Church
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Christina Caron, in her New York Times article titled “How to Feel Less Lonely,” reports that “Americans have become increasingly lonely and isolated, and this lack of social connection is having profound effects on our mental and physical health.”¹

Whether you’re feeling more lonely or not, we can all benefit from making the effort to rebuild and cultivate our connections with other people. Asked for advice about this, US Surgeon General Vivek Murthy suggested you start by taking 15 minutes each day to contact a friend or a relative, because, as Murthy notes, our relationships cannot thrive unless they are nurtured.

In today’s New Testament lesson, Jesus says the two relationships we need to nurture the most are the relationships we have with God and with our neighbor.

He says this in response to the Pharisees, who were trying to trick him into saying something wrong. To test him, they say, “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” It’s a difficult question. If Jesus names one of the 10 Commandments as greatest, he’ll be accused of ignoring the others. If he says all are great, he looks weak for not really answering the question.

Setting such a trap for Jesus, the Pharisees clearly are not interested in nurturing relationships – not with God or their neighbors in this world. They’re only interested in maintaining their power by using religious law to control the lives of others.

Being so fearful of others, trying to control things at all costs – it’s a trap we can all fall into, if we’re not thoughtful about our relationship with others, whether it be with family members and relatives, friends and acquaintances, people in our community, workplace or school; and certainly, with those people we don’t like very much, those whom we don’t respect or trust.

How do we manage our relationships with these folks? It’s not easy, is it? We love our families and those we count as family, but we don’t always like them. Sometimes we hate what they’re doing or how they’re acting, and this hate can seep into our hearts.

And then there are those people we get to make choices about, the people further out in our social circle. We may have to interact with them, but we don’t have to like them, let alone love them.

¹ Christina Caron, “How to Feel Less Lonely, According to the Surgeon General,” The New York Times, May 2, 2023. <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/05/02/well/mind/loneliness-isolation-surgeon-general.html>. Retrieved May 5, 2023.

And further out from these folks are all the people whom we don't interact with directly – our “friends” and others on social media, the telemarketers and survey takers who won't leave us alone, the US lawmakers we see on the news, the world leaders we hear about and the citizens of other nations. We can have the nastiest feelings about people we don't even know.

And yet, when it comes to loving your neighbor as yourself, Jesus seems to include anybody and everybody. I don't know that Jesus ever hated anyone. That's a pretty big standard to live up to, and it all starts with nurturing and maintaining our love of God.

What is it to love God “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind” – this greatest and first commandment? I mean, none of us have ever actually seen God, so how do we show we love him. Loving God can be a bit fuzzy and imprecise. We're just not sure what's expected.

In discovering what's expected from us in our love of God, let's look at what it is to love God heart and soul, and with our minds. In Jesus' day, the heart was not the center of emotions, but rather, the will. Jesus is saying that behind our love there is intention, motive, and purpose.

Take some time this week to consider what is your intention in loving God, your motive and your purpose. What do you expect for yourself and for our world from your love of God? Think about that.

And as you do, let's look at what it is to love God with all your soul. The Greek word for soul is *psuché*, which is kind of like the word *psyche* – the ego, the self, the essence of what it means to be aware and alive.

All of what makes us able to process things, to express our personality, to socialize and empathize – everything that makes us human – that is the essence of our soul.

As you consider your expectations in loving God, consider also what you bring to that relationship, how you process, express, and share your love of God. How do we express our love of God? Think about that.

Finally, the Greek word for mind that Matthew uses here is *dianoia*. *Dianoia* refers to our thoughts, our understanding, our rational being. It asks, “What do you think about loving God? How do you understand it? How do you rationalize it?”

Spend some time thinking about that. And as you do, let it deepen your relationship with God. Let your expectations, your commitment and your thoughts about loving God inform how you could better express this love with God and share it with others.

Expressing and sharing our love of God – this is at the heart of loving your neighbor as yourself. When we love our neighbor as ourselves, we, in turn, are nurturing our love of

God. We are blessing others with the love, compassion, mercy and justice that we receive from God, and in that, we ourselves, are blessed.

This is really so simple, isn't it? So simple and yet so hard. We fail in our commitment to love God and neighbor every day. Too often, we forget about God or let the day's pressures and distractions crowd him out. We shout at our loved ones, gossip about people, hoard what time and money we could give, out of a sense of fear and scarcity.

And that leaves us and everyone else unhappy and on edge. It's a vicious cycle that's hard to break. It's no surprise that people respond to our unloving ways by being unloving to us and others. No, something has to give.

And that something is us. We have to give ourselves over to our love of God and neighbor, as hard as that is. And to do that, we have to look to Jesus for inspiration and guidance, strength and support.

After Jesus answers the Pharisees' trick question – by showing them and all people that love is at the core of who he is – he then shows them the power of love, and the authority he has as the one whom God calls his beloved, his son.

Jesus asks the Pharisees, "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They say to him, "The son of David." After quoting David in Psalm 110, Jesus says, "If David ... calls (the Messiah) Lord, how can (the Messiah) be his son?"

And Mathew tells us, "No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions." The Pharisees finally learn that they can't win against Jesus through their knowledge and skill as leaders and manipulators.

Sadly, this leaves in their bag of tricks only brutality and execution. But as we know, Jesus – through the love of God – will not be overcome by any power of any kind.

Jesus went to the cross filled with love – he loved the Lord his God with all of his heart, soul and mind, and he loved his neighbors as himself. He loved each of us enough to die for us, that we would come to believe in him and never die, but have eternal life in Christ Jesus.

Seeing and remembering a love such as that – feeling Jesus' love in your heart and soul, letting it sink into your mind and body – that is what enables us to love God as we should, and love our neighbor as ourselves. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER

O God, you are worthy of all our praise and worship. Today we celebrate your love and our relationship with you through Jesus Christ. Thank you for expressing your love for us in so many ways.

As we think of your love, we are reminded of your call to love those around us. Help us to discover that the more we give ourselves to you, the more we have left to give ourselves to others. Help us to serve others joyfully in your name.

We pray for those who are marginalized, infirmed, poor, victimized, and voiceless. We pray for those who have lost loved ones, and especially those whose loss comes as a result of senseless violence and war.

We pray for those recovering from illness and disease, and especially those we name in our hearts at this time. And for us, O God, grant us the grace to listen with love, to think with compassion, to pause and consider, so that we might be a person others turn to because of our love of Christ and faithfulness to the Lord Jesus, who taught us to pray together, saying:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.

Thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.

For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. Amen.