

Sermon: October 25, 2020 Matthew 22: 34-40

Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev Greg Wooley

View at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SQoyXyzgGug>

LOVE is at the core of today's gospel lesson. The first three gospels all recount the same story, of Jesus being asked which commandment is greatest, and in the fourth gospel Jesus volunteers some thoughts expressing the same sentiment.

In today's reading from Matthew, and in the 12th chapter of Mark, the setting is the same as it was in last week's gospel reading: Jesus, recently and not-too-quietly arrived in Jerusalem, is asked a question about which commandment in the Hebrew Scriptures is greatest. In reply, Jesus links two of the 613 commandments – Deuteronomy 6:5, to love God with your entire being, and Leviticus 19:8, to love your neighbour as yourself.

But what is this Love we are called to? In Hebrew and, we assume, the commonly spoken Aramaic that Jesus and his disciples used in everyday speech, there was one word for love. Similar to the word 'love' in English, the Hebrew word for love, *ahavath*, was a broad-spectrum word for love, used in many circumstances. But classical Greek had at least six words for love, and when looking for the nuance that Jesus was bringing, Matthew chose the word *agapē* to depict what Jesus had said in Aramaic. Bible blogger Mike Livingstone writes: "**Agapē is the sacrificial, unconditional love of God.** In the New Testament, *agapē* is the highest form of love.... Outside of the New Testament, the word was rarely used;... It's the New Testament understanding of the unique nature of God's love—not the word's usage in the Greek-speaking world of the first century—that gives the word *agapē* its special meaning.." *Agapē* is the word used for love of God, love of neighbour, and love of self, in today's scripture.

This love isn't just a friendly comradeship, or the kind of loyal/familial connection you have with your kin or people from your community; it's not a romantic love and it's not the kind of love you attach to a favourite taste or a favourite song. This is the unconditional love that God has for us and that we are called to have for God and God's agenda of Shalom. This is the love that Christ spoke of and embodied in his parables, healing, death and resurrection. This is the active love of neighbour that can build a better world, a world of equality and equal opportunity and wholeness, a world built when I support you and you support me. Theologian Cynthia Bourgeault has memorably stated, "One of the most familiar of Jesus' teachings is 'Love your neighbor as yourself' But we almost always hear that wrong [as if he had said]: 'Love your neighbor as much as yourself....' If you listen closely to Jesus however, there is no 'as much as' in his admonition. It's just 'Love your neighbor as yourself'—as a continuation of your very own being. It's a complete seeing, that your neighbor is you". To love as Christ loves is 180 degrees different from a mindset that looks after me and those closest to me first, and cares for people and concerns beyond that only if and when it will not disadvantage or inconvenience me in any way *now or in the future* to do so.

As I mentioned earlier, Matthew and Mark both set this question in the final week of Jesus' earthly life, an opportunity for Jesus to gift his followers with some final instructions; Luke places it in the middle of Jesus' ministry, as a set-up for the parable of the Good Samaritan in which Jesus greatly expands the circle of care covered by the

term “neighbour”. The gospel of John doesn’t include the question and answer about which commandment is greatest, but includes this statement about *agape* love by Jesus, spoken in his final week: “I give you a new commandment, that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” (Jn 13: 34-35)

Taken together, these four accounts leave us with no doubt: Jesus tells us that *agape* love is the key to living the life God intends. This love forms the core of our relationship with God, the ground of our being, and it guides us to extend the gift of love as far as we possibly can. No barriers, no exclusions, no exceptions. It is not a gift to be parcelled out to my own nationality or ethnicity only, to my gender or gender expression or sexual orientation only, to my political affiliation only. I’m not even allowed to limit my love to fans of the same sports teams I cheer for, only. We are called to self-giving love in a broad way, from an acceptance of self as beloved of God, to having healthy close relationships, to a full, active concern for and involvement in the needs of our community and our world.

In addition to being absolutely essential, this broadly-expended *agape* love is completely impossible if we try to fly solo. There is no possible way that any human being is up to that task. So if what you first hear in all of this call to love God and neighbour, is a feeling that you are being told that your efforts to love God and neighbour have fallen short, well, you’re not being singled out! This is what it is to be human. Especially if I fill my reading and my media intake to the needs of the world, rather than things that cause me to be suspicious of others, it is easy to become overwhelmed and immobilized and guilty. The more I learn about life as lived in some of the most challenging places on earth, and in some of the most challenging homes in our community, the harder it gets. And when you add into the equation the need to have some sort of healthy personal boundaries, so that you don’t give more than you have to give or open yourself to danger, it’s easy to shut down and give up.

Here is where that wonderful, holy gift known as the grace of God steps in. To acknowledge that Christ calls us to love God with our whole being and to love self and neighbour as one entity, and to admit that this is not humanly possible, opens the door for holy, reconciling grace to play a big role in our lives. Embracing all people, all of creation, as utterly and unconditionally beloved, is at the heart of God; and the gift of God’s grace supports and enriches the process, especially in those places where my efforts and energy and ability fall short of the mark.

Jesus has set me a task impossible to do if I view life as a solitary pursuit, but as I and we seek others who are similarly drawn to this wonderfully impossible task, and as I and we open ourselves to a loving God, whose love is both universally present and personally transformative, things change for the better. I embrace Christ’s invitation to love, not for my own gain, and not fully by my own power, but in order to seek the harmony intended by God.

That may sound like the least practical thing I could possibly say, at this time or at any time, but every now and then – especially at this point in history when “me-first” thinking is creating such divisiveness and contributing to a spike in COVID cases - I need to refocus on this central reality of life. In a recent conversation with ministry friends in the USA, so much of the present As Steven Covey was noted for saying, “the main thing is

to keep the main thing the main thing” or as us baseball coaches would say to hitters disheartened by their lack of success, “keep your eye on the ball.” Jesus had 613 possible answers to this question about which commandment was most important, and rather than picking something about judgment or triumph or personal purity, he chose to link two scriptures about *agape*, self-giving love: love God with all you’ve got; love self and others as if you were one entity. Everything else flows from that and when other things get messed up, take a breath, and reset, and remember these words of faith, singled out by Jesus: love God; love your neighbour as yourself.

With thanksgiving for loving agape-connections with others; with hopes for selfless agape-agendas, angled toward peace and justice and public well-being; with acknowledgement that I and we are going to need significant help to stay healthy and energized in this big, basic venture: we offer God and the world our thanks and praise, our humility and vulnerability, to recommit all that I am and all that I do, to God’s own heartbeat of love. Thanks be to God, Amen.

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