

All You Need Is Love

A Sermon Preached by the
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Stewardship Commitment Sunday
Oak Grove Presbyterian Church
Bloomington, Minnesota

Psalm 90:1-6
Matthew 22:34-46

*“How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and Ideal Grace.”*

Most of us recognize those words, even if we can't quite remember exactly where or when we heard them. Some of us could probably identify them as part of a sonnet. Some of us could even remember the writer as Elizabeth Barrett Browning, if we stayed awake through the section of 19th century English poetry in high school literature. Others of us would even be able to identify these words as the opening lines of the forty-third of forty-four “Sonnets from the Portuguese” written secretly for her husband Robert Browning.

As long as we're counting the ways, how about this one? *“How do I love you? Count the ways. There ain't no number high enough to end this phrase.”* Not Elizabeth Barrett Browning! No, those are lyrics sung by Garth Brooks, country music mega-star, who, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, poses the same question, but in a very different way, with very different language; but being incurable romantics, both speaking to their particular culture about the mysteries of love.

And this? *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”* Sound familiar? It is, of course, part of the *shema*, which was our lesson from the Hebrew Bible a couple of weeks ago, words from the scriptures recited morning and night by observant Jews as a reminder of their relationship with God.

Today's Gospel lesson is even more to the point: *“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

So can we assume that the Beatles finally got it right? That love, that many-splendored thing that makes the world go 'round, is all we need? Or is it more complicated than that?

As human beings, we have struggled for centuries to find words that express our feelings of love. And we have always been compelled to separate out the different kinds of love we experience. It wouldn't do, for example, to use the same expressions of love between spouses and partners, for us to talk about the love between parent and child. Nor would we be comfortable comparing the love we feel for our child with the love we feel

for the family pet – although many of us with a houseful of children and pets have been known to occasionally whistle for our son or daughter, when we meant to call the dog, and have had to explain to that child that it was only a momentary lapse, that we really do know the difference!

We talk about platonic love and we talk about tough love. We love our friends differently than we love our life-partners. We love our co-workers, but not in the same way we love our church community. And we love our enemies, because we believe that we are commanded to do so, and in loving them we somehow justify – rightly or wrongly - the fact that we don't necessarily like them. We love selfishly and self-righteously, just as we love selflessly and justly.

We want to make sure we're not misunderstood when we declare our love. So it is to our advantage to clarify our intentions, to put conditions on our love, to make sure we don't offend or unintentionally mislead another person. And, to be sure, boundaries are healthy if they're in place for the right reasons. We all know there is far too much abuse in the name of love.

We've noted before that for a first-century Jew, love wasn't about feeling warm and fuzzy or sweet with hearts and flowers. It was about doing. When Jesus asked Peter if he loved him, Peter replied, "Lord, you know that I do." Jesus didn't say, "Then come give me a hug," he said, "Feed my sheep." Commenting on the contemporary context of this scripture passage, noted New Testament scholar Eugene Boring reminds his readers that, "When Christians use the word *love* with reference to God, to the deepest human relationships, and of the stance they are called to exercise toward the world, the content of this word is . . . from the understanding of God's nature made known in Christ. It is from this revelatory perspective that we come to know love as unmotivated and unmanipulated, unconditional and unlimited. Such love is not a matter of feeling, which cannot be commanded in any case, but of commitment and action. It is at the farthest pole from sentimentality and is related to the Old Testament word for 'covenant love' or 'steadfast love.'"¹

In this concluding encounter with his opponents, this time the Pharisees again, Matthew gives Jesus another opportunity to summarize the core of his teaching. Given that the writer of the Gospel of Matthew has already spent most of his time presenting Jesus as the one who teaches the centrality of love in the life of the disciples, as absolutely fundamental to the life of discipleship, the nature of the test is not clear.

But notice that the questioner says, "Teacher, which commandment *in the law* is the greatest?" You know that the rabbis counted 613 commandments in the Law, 248 positive commandments corresponding to the number of parts of the body, and 365 negative commandments corresponding to the days of the year. Rabbinical scholars could certainly give summaries of the Law, but they were always careful to maintain that all commandments were equal, knowing that to rank them in any way would seem presumptive. It might even have been considered sinful for them to argue that some are more important than others on the basis of some human standard of judgment. So it may be that the Pharisees were trying to get Jesus to make some statement that would disparage some part of the Law. After all, they've been trying for days to catch him in a mistake that would justify his arrest and perhaps even his death. They've plotted to entrap

¹ M. Eugene Boring, *The Interpreter's Bible: Matthew*, Vol. VIII, p. 425.

him by asking about paying taxes to the emperor, “Tell us then, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” They’ve challenged his authority, “By what authority are you doing these things and who gave you this authority?”

And even though Jesus is asked for one commandment, he gives two, and the writer of Matthew is quick to add that the second one is like the first. That doesn’t mean that it’s just similar, but that it is of equal importance and inseparable from the first. “The great command to love God has as its inseparable counterpart the command to love neighbor. One cannot first love God and then, as a second task, love one’s neighbor. To love God is to love one’s neighbor, and vice-versa.”²

This is the day that we have designated as Stewardship Commitment Sunday, the day that we bring our pledges of financial support for Oak Grove Presbyterian Church. We’ve talked about stewardship as being more than just meeting the budget. We’ve talked about how the current economy may make it difficult for us to pledge at the same level as last year, or even to pledge at all. And that’s fine, because we also value the support that comes with the gift of time and talent and energy and prayers.

We’ve talked a lot about giving as gratitude for all that has been given to us, and giving as a response to God’s extravagant generosity towards us. We’ve talked about giving as the legacy we pass on to future generations, and as a way that we continue to pass down the history and heritage of those who have gone before us here at Oak Grove.

One stewardship resource that we’ve been using calls this the “Stewardship of Community,” and reminds us that, “God has placed us in community to serve and be served. Together we worship, grow in faith and understanding, and serve in ministry and mission. Within the community we are nurtured, challenged, comforted, and given opportunities to share our gifts. Together we are called to be stewards of the memories and work of the community.”³ Our Psalm for today, noted as “A Prayer of Moses, the man of God,” begins with those beautiful words, “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. . . from everlasting to everlasting you are God,” and ends with “Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands.” We are called to be stewards of the memories and the work of this particular community from generation to generation.

The point is also made that stewardship is about choices. We are born into communities, just like we are born into families. But we also choose communities, like our church community, our faith community, and our choice is influenced by our relationship with God and our relationship with others.

Communities make choices as well, and those choices reflect the values of the individuals within the community. One of the ways that we chose to present the budget needs for 2009 was through a video that served as a kind of narrative budget, showing all the ways that we choose to be stewards of what God has entrusted to our care. Perhaps “True stewardship is coming to a transformative realization of to what – and to whom – our choices bind us most closely.”⁴

² Ibid.

³ *Faithfulness Sustains the Generations*, Vol. 1, part 1, p. 29.

⁴ Cherie Isakson, “Why Does Jesus Ask Hard Questions?” *HungryHearts*, summer 2008, p. 14.

I think that the bottom line is that we give because we are loved. And because God first loves us, we love God with all of our heart, our soul, our mind and our strength, and we love our neighbors as ourselves. As the apostle Paul reminded that curmudgeonly community in Corinth, “Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. . . Love never ends.”

Commentator Douglas Hare writes, “In an age when the word ‘love’ is greatly abused, it is important to remember that the primary component of biblical love is not affection but commitment. Warm feelings of gratitude may fill our consciousness as we consider all that God has done for us, but it is not warm feelings that the *shema* demands of us but rather stubborn, unwavering commitment. Similarly, to love our neighbor, including our enemies, does not mean that we must feel affection for them. To love the neighbor is to imitate God by taking their needs seriously.”⁵ That kind of love *is* all we need.

So bring your gift this morning in gratitude; bring it with a generous spirit, bring it with cheerfulness because God loves a cheerful giver. Bring it because you truly believe that faithfulness sustains the generations. Bring it because you love this community and want it to have a future. Bring it because you have been enriched by the relationships you have formed here, because you love the music, because your children love Sunday School, because there’s no other place quite like it in your life, because you choose to be here. And finally, bring whatever you have to give because you are loved. Thanks be to God! Amen.

⁵ Douglas Hare, “Matthew,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Preaching and Teaching*, Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993, p. 260.