

**Oak Grove Presbyterian Church**

**Rev. Dr. Bart Roush**

**November 6, 2022**

**Matthew 22:34–40**

Let us pray for an awareness of and inspiration from God's Spirit.

We are hungry, O God, for truth, for justice, for love. Nourish us this day with better food than we could ever purchase, engineer or manufacture, your Word, your love, your Spirit, your daily bread for our life's journey, in the company of Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.

“When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” He said to him, “‘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.”

A couple of weeks ago, I told you all I was over the book of Matthew and its really difficult stories. That I had wished for readings from the embroidered pillow lectionary, those sayings or stories that are feel good and would look nice on a cross-stitch framed on the wall or on a pillow. I just needed to hold on more week to hear Jesus preach on love. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind; and you shall you're your neighbor as yourself, that's more like it. Love, it's such a simple message. It's almost as if I could read the scripture, say Amen, and then sit down. Almost.

Poets and singers have known the message of love for years.

The Beatles knew... **All you need is love.**

There's nothing you can do that can't be done  
Nothing you can sing that can't be sung  
Nothing you can say, but you can learn how to play the game  
It's easy  
Nothing you can make that can't be made  
No one you can save that can't be saved  
Nothing you can do, but you can learn how to be you in time  
It's easy  
All you need is love. All you need is love. All you need is love, love.  
Love is all you need

**What the World needs now...** Jackie DeShannon  
(lyrics by Hal David music by Burt Bacharach)

What the world needs now is love, sweet love  
It's the only thing that there's just too little of  
What the world needs now is love, sweet love,  
No not just for some but for everyone.

**One Love – Bob Marley**

One love, one Heart  
Let's get together and feel all right  
As it was in the beginning (one love)  
So shall it be in the end (one heart)  
Give thanks and praise to the Lord and I will feel all right  
One more thing

It's a big kind of love... love for everyone.

“‘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.’”

An expert in the law, a Pharisee, approaches Jesus and asks, “Which commandment is first of all?” This question is a fundamental question for a Jew. There are over 600 laws in the Jewish tradition, there was great debate about how to order and structure life to be able to follow in obedience. With so many laws, how does one begin to prioritize them, how does one remember them, let alone follow them?

Upon hearing the question, Jesus answers immediately with a response that utters the foundational words of the Jewish faith. He begins by reciting a passage from Deuteronomy 6, known as the Shema. The Shema is the cornerstone of liturgical and spiritual life for the Jews. It affirms the oneness of God, and the obligation of the faithful to love and obey God.

Jesus answers with the text that interprets every other text, he uses the words that undergird every other claim or law. But Jesus also moves beyond the original question and adds a second command, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Perhaps one could argue that this second command is already inherent within the first, but Jesus makes it explicit. Jesus affirms that faith not only has a Godward dimension but must also include right relationship with humanity. You cannot worship and honor God and neglect your neighbor. You cannot neglect or mistreat your neighbor and honor God.

By adding the love of neighbor as well as the command to love God with all your heart, soul, and mind, Jesus succinctly summarizes all of the Ten Commandments. The Ten Commandments are separated into two tablets. The first tablet is God-centered and focuses on our relationship with God; things like not having idols, refraining from taking the Lord’s name in vain, remembering a time for Sabbath. These are commandments focused on our individual relationship with God. The second tablet is neighbor-centered and focuses on our relationship with others; things like forbidding murder, not lying, stealing, or

coveting our neighbor's spouse or things. These are commandments focused on how we act with one another.

The first part of the commandments describes the vertical dimension, our relationship with God. The second part of the commandments describe a horizontal dimension, our relationship with those around us. You cannot have one without the other, you must have love of God, and love of neighbor. Love of neighbor builds upon the foundation of our love for God, and our love of God is not complete without how we love our neighbor. In other words, how we attend to God determines and shapes the ways in which we attend to our neighbor and vice versa.

The way we understand God and act toward God has direct bearing on how we respond and act toward our neighbor. Because we have received the saving grace of God and that love lives in us, therefore we have hearts of love and do acts of love. Ours is a faith that is a "because-therefore" faith and not an "if-then" faith. Our faith is not based on "if you follow these commandments, then you will receive God's love. Rather, "Because God loves us and God's love lives within us, therefore love flows out of us from God."<sup>i</sup> Our faith is a "because-therefore" faith. Jesus asks us to shape our lives by an embodied love that is derived by the love we receive from God.

And on one level, it really is that simple, that straightforward. But we also know it is messier than all of that, because love is contextual and its embodied, and we humans tend to muck things up, and we are forgetful, and selfish, and prideful, and a whole host of other things.

One of the most interesting things about this passage is what happens before and after, and to whom Jesus is talking. Jesus is in Jerusalem, and he has been teaching in the synagogues and more and more people are interested in what he has to say. And the religious leaders are beginning to get a little worried. And then they get downright upset. They question

where his authority comes from; they don't know if he has the proper credentials.

A few stories earlier, Jesus has disrupted the religious practices of the community by flipping the tables at the temple and throwing the money changers out. There are then a series of questions by different groups of religious leaders trying to catch Jesus and have him say something that will be so egregious and scandalous that the people will stop wanting to hear from him. One group questions him, and then another. And that's where our story from today starts, but what is interesting is that these two groups don't normally like each other. But they put their differences aside and align with one another to ask yet another question seeking to trap Jesus into saying the wrong thing. Directly after the story from today, Jesus then denounces both groups. Calls them out on their foolishness and hypocrisy. Jesus words of condemnation are a forceful rebuke of religious people who forget and undermine the vulnerable neighbors using their religion as a cover.

Jesus flips tables, calls into question the faithfulness of their religious practice, challenges old ways of thinking, reminds them that to love God is to also love neighbor, and calls them to account. All you need is love.

Is this what love looks like? This is not nice. This is not polite. Is this what love looks like? It's direct. It's challenging. It's hard. It's honest. Is this what love looks like? In a word, yes.

Jesus ends his conversation, his challenge, with the religious leaders by speaking to the thing they know best, to what they preach and profess well, the Law and the Prophets. "The Law requires righteousness as an expression of commitment to God's will. The prophets demanded justice for people at the margins." The language around righteousness and justice has the connotation of right relationship. As one scholar says, "Accordingly, righteousness and justice are intrinsically connected and are predicated upon being in right relationship with the divine and with

fellow human beings. One cannot be in right relationship with God unless one does everything possible to be in right relationship with one's neighbors as well.”<sup>ii</sup>

The challenge of Jesus to the religious leaders is a reminder that as people of faith, our faith is inextricably linked on our ability and our willingness to ensure justice for those who are denied justice. This is not an abstract ideal but should manifest in concrete ways.

On Saturday, Pastor Mary and I attended a conference sponsored by the Minnesota Council of Churches entitled, “White Church Truths.” The keynote speaker was a sociologist from Chicago who is soon to publish a book based on research over the last few years concerning predominately white churches and race. He outlined how the Christian religion for more than two-thirds of white practicing Christians has been distorted, betrayed, and replaced by a theology around the dominance, centrality, and assumed universality of being white. There was also a panel of church leaders of color who offered honesty and insight, and who discussed how this religion of whiteness shows up in the church, including mainline, progressive churches like Oak Grove. The research the keynote speaker shared, the stories told by the panel, and the questions raised were challenging, disturbing, and convicting. I won't say much because I am still processing what we heard, and I look forward to being able to digest more of the research when the book comes out. But I will say two things that struck me, and they, I think are related.

One, was a term the sociologist used called flourishing mendacity. That is, the pervasiveness of ignorance. The inability and unwillingness to learn, to see the harm being done to our black, brown, and indigenous siblings. If I don't know about it, I don't have to do anything about it.

The second, was the tendency of “good” white Christians, to easily point the finger away from themselves to “them,” to those “bad” Christians.

There is little energy to look inwardly to see where we might be contributing to this religion of whiteness and the harm it creates.

The Reverend Jim Bear Jacobs, one of the organizers of the event, and a Native man, Pastor, educator, and advocate, told us that every time, without fail, that he preaches at a mainline, predominantly white, progressive church, he asked the same question. It usually is something like, “given the history of the church and the harm it has done to Native peoples, how can you reconcile your faith?” His departing challenge to the white Christians in the room yesterday, was to wonder if anyone one of us have ever been asked this question. And if not, why not? Given the history of violence of the church, how do you reconcile your faith?

All you need is love. What does love look like?

Love doesn't just happen. It requires work. It requires deliberate decisions and actions. When Jesus talks about love, he almost never is talking about emotions. He is talking about a commitment to action. Love is embodied. Love isn't sentimental but active.

The great commandment to love God with everything we have and to love our neighbor in the same way we love ourselves is dependent on our willingness to ensure justice for our neighbors who are denied justice. Our prayers, our study, and our worship that seek and call for justice are the catalyst for action, and never a substitute. As much as I like a beautiful prayer, or a good Facebook post, it is not the same as a commitment to action.

Jesus gives the reminder, directly, to the religious leaders about love. And we also need the reminder, we need the distillation of it all down to the simple command, love god, love yourself, love others. And what does that love look like?

One of the presenters yesterday, a white teacher and pastor, reminded us of the following quote attributed to Lila Watson, and it says, “If you

have come to help me you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together.”

What does love look like? We will talk about that a little following worship in our congregational conversation for where God might be leading us next. If you are able to stay for that, I encourage you to do so. What does love look like for Oak Grove?

I leave you with one more quote, not from yesterday, and not from scripture, but from a character from a Marvel movie. From King T'Challa in *Black Panther*. He says, “We will work to be an example of how we, as brothers and sisters on this earth, should treat each other. Now, more than ever, the illusions of division threaten our very existence. We all know the truth, more connects us than separates us. But in times of crisis the wise build bridges, while the foolish build barriers. We must find a way to look after one another, as if we were one single tribe.”

What does love look like?

Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Edward Markquart, *The Hinge, The Two Great Commandments*, from the course *The Life of Christ: A Study in the Four Gospels*.

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revised-common-lectionary/ordinary-30/commentary-on-matthew-2234-46>