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Matthew 22:34-46

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."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet"'? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

When I was a child, my parents harbored some hope that I would be sporty. One day at swimming lessons, I took off from one side of the pool with six other children doing the backstroke. The other five made it eventually to the opposite side of the pool. I managed to swim in circles, one arm pulling harder than the other, wondering where I was going and why it was taking so long. I never made it to the other side of the pool. I stopped swimming and turned over to see what was happening. I told anyone who would listen that backstroke was an unrealistic expectation. There was no way of seeing where you were going, and everything up in the sky either blinds you, or is in motion itself. How on earth, I thought, could you get a bearing on where you were, let alone where you were going? Needless to say, I did not become a champion backstroker. I was, rather quickly, bought some goggles and switched to the freestyle. Even as a tiny person, I felt comforted in the water because I could see the black line of tiles on the bottom of the pool pointing me in the right direction. I loved to watch that line and keep myself centered on it as I went.

Today's scripture provides Christians with that same centering effect. In Jesus' time, there were over 600 laws in the Hebrew Bible, which were regularly argued over and debated by legal scholars. It was just such a lawyer who challenged Jesus to today's battle of wits. Teacher, he asked, which of God's commands is the greatest? Jesus, as he had a habit of doing, changed the rules. Rather than debate the merits, and demerits, the pros and cons of myriad different laws, Jesus switched strokes. He answered a legalistic question with a faith answer. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and with all your mind. And you shall love your neighbor as yourself. Focus here, he says. On these two commandments hang all the law, and the prophets. The Law refers to the first five books of the Hebrew Bible, called the Torah or the Law of Moses. And the prophets refers to all the other books of the Hebrew Bible. The whole of the Old Testament hangs upon loving God with all that you are, and loving your neighbor as yourself.

Christians learn about loving God and loving our neighbor when we are very young. We teach it to our children. It's made its way into pop culture, songs, and stories. "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you" we say. It's the Golden Rule. Even non-Christians know it by that name. It's really quite famous, and that's good, except that sometimes we are blind to those things

that we are most familiar with. We see what we expect. We focus on the Golden Rule, and we forget about the Great Commandment, to love God. The second commandment begins to pull harder than the first, and that can lead us to swim in circles, rather than a straight line.

Sometimes we go off into the world with a firm intent to love other people. We decide that we know what is best for them, and in our desire to do good, we substitute being authoritarian and knowledgeable for being empathetic and understanding. This happens sometimes with disaster relief efforts. Rather than donating money and requested items, people donate used clothes and stuffed animals, which end up blocking runways and preventing planes from landing with relief supplies. Hurricane survivors in tropical countries don't need old winter coats, high-heeled shoes, or teddy bears as much as they need water purification equipment.

Sometimes what happens is that we begin to love conditionally. When we disagree with someone, rather than seek to love them, we try to fix what we think is wrong in them through argumentation. We want them to agree with us before we love them. Or worse yet, we convince ourselves that arguing with them until they agree with us is itself a loving act.

And I think one of the things that happens most often when we are out in the world trying to love our neighbor is that we give up on acts of love completely. Either to begin with, or through burnout. We decide that all we need to do is feel love emotionally inside ourselves, and God will take care of the rest. This is what happens when crisis is met with "thoughts and prayers" alone. Thoughts and prayers are wonderful things, but they don't do much if God's people aren't willing to be God's hands and feet in the world.

When love gets thrown off-kilter in this way, it's time to go back to our scriptural guideline. Remember what Jesus declares is the Greatest Commandment. It is the oldest fixed daily prayer in Judaism. It is called the Shema, which means to listen or hear. *Sh'ma Yisra'eil Adonai Eloheinu Adonai echad*. Hear, O Israel, The Lord Our God. The Lord is One. You Shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your mind. These words begin worship. They focus our attention and our hearts on God.

If we focus on the Golden Rule more than the Great Commandment, we swim in circles. Love begins to be something that we do for others in order to make ourselves feel better. In many ways, it inflates our own sense of self-importance and ego. But Jesus teaches us that love of neighbor is an outpouring, and an overflowing of the love that we have for God. That pure love is the kind of love Jesus modeled for us in his life, death, and resurrection. It doesn't need something in return. Love becomes its own reward. That is the gift of the Great Commandment. It is also the gift that the church can bring to the world. Start in the sanctuary. Begin with worship. Encounter God in the Sacraments. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind. With everything that is in you, love God. From that starting point, follow the guideline. Go out into the world with the purity of love for love's sake alone. Love enthusiastically and unconditionally. Love because of your relationship to God. Love the lovely, and love the difficult. Love those who deserve it, and those who don't. It's not about what you can get from the people you love. It's about bringing healing and reconciliation into a world that badly needs it. Love for the sake of Love.