

A Homily by  
The Rev'd Jo Popham

Love God; love our neighbor; love ourselves. Period. Full stop!  
Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost  
October 29, 2023  
Matthew 22:34-46

Imagine with me that we are 1<sup>st</sup> century Jewish followers of Christ. And we are in the square outside Temple debating Torah, debating Jewish law. We are the people to whom Matthew was writing. Every day some of us gathered to talk – sometimes to argue – about which of the laws in Torah was the most important. It had been our most often debated question. How do we live as good Jews? How we live a Godly life – in an ungodly world where we have little control of so many aspects of our lives. What does it mean to love God and one another when we cannot express what we believe freely in our community? Our leader – Jesus of Nazareth – has been under scrutiny by the Jewish authorities. And they have come up all sorts of tests – of questions – for Jesus.

This – the final test that the Pharisees came up with for Jesus – was to ask: “Of the laws in Torah, which is the most important?” All 613? Yes, 613. We have a hard enough time recalling all ten commandments of Moses, much less all 613 Jewish laws that the rabbis have come up with to keep us pure and holy. Jesus answered rightly, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” But then Jesus went further. He quoted Leviticus adding “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”<sup>1</sup> And he said that the second commandment was like the first. The second commandment – to love your neighbor as yourself – was to be given the same weight as the first.

One of the first commentaries on this second commandment that Christ Jesus gave us is in the Epistles. In the Letter of James we are to understand that when Christ said “love your neighbor as yourself,” he was essentially saying, “treat all those around you as you would your own flesh and blood” – as sisters and brothers in one family, deserving of special care and equal honor.<sup>2</sup>

Loving one another, loving our neighbors, even strangers, is a really tall order. And to love others as though they were our blood relatives, now that is even harder. But I want to suggest that loving oneself may be the hardest for us. Do we love ourselves? Do we really love ourselves? How can we love one another if we do not love ourselves? If we are to live into the two great commandments that Christ gave us, we need to live as one loved by God, so that we can love ourselves. Why is this so important, we might ask? Because all the law and the prophets hang on it, my friends. Everything that we are taught about God, everything that God has revealed about Godself, is dependent upon how we live into the two great commandments. Everything depends upon loving God and others and ourselves!<sup>3</sup>

The Pharisees – and most certainly the lawyer among them who asked Jesus which was the most important of God’s laws – held themselves up as experts in Biblical interpretation. The first and great commandment everyone understood: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” This is the central portion of the *shema*, the Jewish prayer that even little children could recite: they prayed – as we do – to love the Lord their God, with all their hearts, souls, and might. Loving God with all your heart meant with their will. Loving God with all your soul meant with their lives. Loving God with all your might meant with their wealth. Matthew changed might to mind.

*Shema Yisrael Adonai Eloheinu Adonai Echad* – “Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is One” – the Shema – was prayed first thing in the morning and before going to bed at night. Most Jews knew that God was one – the only God. So the first and greatest commandment to love the Lord your God was the answer that the Pharisees expected. But to love your neighbor as yourself – that was problematic. The lawyer was scratching his head. The Pharisees must have asked themselves why Jesus would answer using a lesser known – even obscure – Levitical text: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

How can we love our neighbor as ourselves? What is the right form of self-love? Is self love Biblical? Well, yes, and no. We hear it in Jesus's command to love our neighbor as ourselves. It is assumed to be true that we love ourselves. But he commanded that we love ourselves?<sup>4</sup> Is loving oneself the same as self-absorption? Is it human nature to love ourselves – even to the point of being absorbed with ourselves? These days it seems to be a hallmark of what it means to be human – given the many “selfies” we are exposed to every day in this “all about me” world. But we cannot blame Matthew's reading for the anarchy and even the narcissism that we see all too often on the news and even in one another?

Like many of us, I have been glued to the news these last few weeks as war is raging again in the Middle East. I began to worry that people of different religious backgrounds must not share the same meaning of God's love as we. If we are to love God , because God is love, and love our neighbor as our self, how can we treat one another with such hatred. For our Jewish friends and neighbors, what does Torah teach about God and love? What does the Quran teach our Muslim friends and neighbors?

Jesus taught that all the law and the prophets hang on Jesus's two great commandments – to love God and love all God's people. But the rabbis taught that the law hangs on Torah – the first five books of the Hebrew Bible alone. Hesed is the Hebrew word for God's love meaning “wrapping up in itself all the positive attributes of God: love, covenant faithfulness, mercy, grace, kindness, loyalty—in short, acts of devotion and loving-kindness that go beyond the requirements of duty.”<sup>5</sup> So “God is love” is not a singular central idea in Jewish theology except as a conditional upon the love of Torah and observance of God's commandments. The love of God is expanded by the Mishnah which was the original oral law of the Jews so that Hesed is so multi-faceted that it can best be expressed only as love in action. Islam's understanding of God as love derives from Allah's name as Al-Wadūd meaning “The Most Loving” ascribed in the Qur'ān and from the attribution of this name from which an intricate Islamic theology

unfolds.<sup>6</sup> To Muslims God – Allah – is the origin of love. “God does not start loving you to stop loving you, because His Love is Eternal and has no beginning to have an end.”<sup>7</sup>

Directly from the Quran:

“Verily, Allah loves those who do good.”<sup>8</sup>

“Verily, Allah loves those who are penitent and those who keep themselves pure.”<sup>9</sup>

“For verily, Allah loves those who are righteous.”<sup>10</sup>

Judaism, Islam, and Christianity, all three are Abrahamic religions, deriving much of their belief systems dating back to the God of Abraham.<sup>11</sup> And that means that we are all heirs of Abraham. In spite of their understanding of God’s love, Christians and Jews and Muslims should be able to relate their shared background – their common source of God’s love – is reason to be brothers and sisters. But often the closer families are related, the more they can be at odds with one another. Certainly this is playing out in real time today. Surely we trust that love can overcome all our differences, but the subtle differences in our theologies seem to divide us. Or more likely it is our denial of our common humanity that is the cause of the strife between us.

Within a few days after Hurricane came ashore and washed us out of New Orleans, I was blessed to be part of setting up the chaplancy program on the floor of the Austin conference center where 5000 of our fellow evacuees sheltered for quite a while. I insisted on having a long table with all the sacred texts of the world’s religions, all translations of the Holy Bible with both the Old and New Testaments, the Hebrew Bible, the Quran, and all other religious texts I could get my hands on. There were some of the chaplains – that I had trained – who refused to support my effort to make all sacred texts available. With the agreement of most all the other chaplains, I pulled the credentials of those who did not want everyone to be able to read the comforting writings of their religions. I did this so that they could not hurt those who needed us. (They were also preaching that the hurricane was punishment for the sins of the people of New Orleans.) Well, it was an election year, and when the offending chaplains petitioned the mayor (who was up for election) he granted them access anyway. So I set up a different training

program for those chaplains and different badges that limited their access to the shelter floor. I suppose everything has always been political. Who we are speaking for matters. And if we were speaking for God, we needed to show God's love to everyone!

The Gospel according to Matthew was written to and for Christian Jews at a time when there was rampant discrimination in the synagogue of the new believers. And the author made clear that the law itself was dependent upon the deeds of love, loving God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and loving your neighbor as yourself. What a radically political and radically human thing to write, loving others as you love yourself! Too often though, our humanity gets in the way of our loving one another simply because we do not know how to love ourselves. Many of God's people – young and old – have a sense of worthlessness. Rather than being absorbed with themselves, rather than valuing themselves more than they ought, they place little value in themselves. To love our neighbor as one who already loves themselves is lost to them. For some it may be difficult to love others for the very reason that they cannot love themselves. So what do we do if we do not love ourselves? (I would suggest that it is as easy as learning to pray. When we don't know how to pray, we talk with God and listen to God as though we were praying – and *Voila!* We are praying.) If we need to learn to love ourselves, we behave as though we do – not in a self-absorbed 21<sup>st</sup> century manner, but as one who truly trusts that God loves us. Acting as though we love ourselves can lead to loving ourselves. It can. Living into the loving person God wants us to be – even when we do not fully believe in ourselves – can lead to believing in ourselves more and more fully and loving ourselves and others more and more fully

I believe that it is our calling – to love abundantly, to love as much as we are humanly able. Jesus – in his life and in his teachings – expressed God's love for us perfectly. Love God and love your neighbor as yourself. Everything hangs on that love. Everything!

Lord, may it be so.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> See Leviticus 19:18 (You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.), Matthew 19:18 (Honor your father and mother; also, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.), Galatians 5:14 (For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”), James 2:8 (You do well if you really fulfill the royal law according to the scripture, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”), Ephesians 5:29 (For no one has ever hated his own body but he feeds it and takes care of it, just as Christ also does the church.).

<sup>2</sup> See James 2:1-17.

<sup>3</sup> I personally set a lot of store in this. I trust entirely that it is by God’s grace and God’s grace alone, that I am who I am, doing what I do as faithfully as I possibly can, here in this place, at this time, because of God’s love for me. And because God loves me – because I am precious to God – I must first care for me. All I am and all I have is a gift from God; I am because God loves me and has cared for me. Now I wish that I had known this earlier in my life. I would not have driven my little red convertible Volkswagen bug up and over the levee all the time just to see how high I could fly had I realized how much God loves me and wants me to love myself so that I can love others. But it is never too late to embrace how much we are worth to God and to others. I drive much more conservatively now, well, most of the time, well, at least when I have someone else in my truck. My brothers and sisters, it is never too late to live as a precious child of God. We are all deserving of God’s special care and honor. We are. If we actively pursue a right relationship with God, we cannot help but love ourselves and our neighbors. And how do we develop a right relationship with God? We can begin by study of Holy Scripture.<sup>3</sup> We can delve into the Bible anew, keeping in mind God’s love for us all the while. It still amazes me how Scripture speaks to us differently at different times of our lives

<sup>4</sup> Many Biblical scholars say that Jesus’s second commandment hardly commands self-love. Indeed there are many Biblical texts that suggest our lives should be focused on others rather than ourselves. Surely Jesus’s radical hospitality of treating others better than himself is our model. His extreme sacrifice on the cross is our best example.

<sup>5</sup> Bible scholar Darrell L. Bock.

<sup>6</sup> Quran 11:90 and 85:14.

<sup>7</sup> See <https://www.islamicity.org/5216/allah-the-loving>.

<sup>8</sup> Quran 2:195.

<sup>9</sup> Quran 2:222.

<sup>10</sup> Quran. 3:76.

<sup>11</sup> I have intentionally left out those other religions that date far back and in some cases father back than the Abrahamic disciplines. The [Bahá’í Faith](#), taught that God created humans due to his love for them, and thus humans should in turn love [God](#). Latter-day Saints have many examples of the love of [Jesus](#) in their [Book of Mormon](#). Indian-origin religions have very subtle different interpretations of God’s love in Hinduism believes God is love, love as the only thing which is like a soul within us, Buddhism speaks of God’s love as unselfish love for others, and in Sikhism love means love for the Lord and His creation.