

Messiah Moravian Church
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Twenty-second Sunday After Pentecost, Year A
Dane Perry
Matthew 22:34-46

Relationships Not Rules

Our text begins and ends in silence, and this silence is not golden. It's an unsettling silence, the silence of the "powers that be" as they regroup to plot the death of Jesus. The religious authorities repeatedly try to trap Jesus with trick questions. But every time, he slips the trap. At every turn, Jesus's answers disrupt their interpretations of Scripture and rearrange their theological presumptions.

This time it's a Pharisaic lawyer with a simple question, easily asked, delicately answered: What's the most important law? Jewish scholars once counted the laws of Moses and came up with - not ten - but 613 separate commandments of equal importance, which were divided the 365 "you shall nots", one for each day of the year, and 268 "you shalls", one for the bones and organs of the body. Jesus is asked to pick one, leaving himself open to criticism for not choosing any of the remaining 612, each one designated as the undefilable word of God.

An audience member once asked Karl Barth, one of the most imminent theologians of the 20th century, a similar question after a complex theological lecture. Barth was asked what he considered the most profound of all theological truths. Although his answer carried far less serious consequences than Jesus's response, Barth replied simply, "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." He was not being flippant or dismissive. He explained, "The greatest truth is one you already know, the one all Christians know, the one a three-year-old can sing about."

Jesus answered the lawyer similarly: "*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*" The lawyer and the Pharisees know this verse. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, the Shema, words traditionally recited by every Jewish child and adult at the start and end of each day. Many Jews attached a small box to the right doorframe of their homes. When they entered or left their home, they touched this small box, called a mezuzah. A parchment scroll inside the box bore handwritten texts from Deuteronomy, one of which is the "Shema."

Jesus chooses another quote from Leviticus 19: 18 as the inseparable companion of the first commandment: love others, love self. It reminds the lawyer and us that the love mentioned in the first commandment finds its meaning as we apply it to those around us.

According to Jesus, what's absolutely essential is loving God, our neighbors and ourselves. Those three relationships sum up everything about God's will for the world.

What does it mean to love God? Indeed, what does it mean to love anyone? As paradoxically as it may seem, love is not primarily an emotion. Of course, very strong emotions are connected with loving but, at its core, love is not just an emotion. If love were based purely on emotions, what would happen when we are upset or angry with our spouses, children or any of the ones we have promised to love?

If love were primarily an emotion, our way of treating people would then up rise and fall like a rollercoaster, with little dependability in our relationships. How we treat those whom we love would depend entirely on our mood at any given moment.

Love is a decision we make and have to re-make again and again. Love is a choice we make about whom and what we will allow to be important to us. Based on those decisions, our love then becomes something we do.

Psychiatrist Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Traveled*, wrote an eloquent, inclusive definition of love: *"Love is the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth... Love is an act of will — namely, both an intention and an action. Will also implies choice. We do not have to love. We choose to love, [and] love is as love does."*

He also says that the first rule of love is to give attention. To love is to choose to pay attention to those whom we love, allowing them to be who they are and honoring what they think and say. Peck goes on to add that the most important part of paying attention is listening. To listen intently is to signal that the speaker is important and worthy. To be paid attention to, to be listened to, is to be loved.

What if we used Peck's understanding of love to guide us in what it means to love God?

- Then loving God with all our hearts and souls and minds would mean listening to God and giving careful and personal attention to what is important to God.
- Then loving God means that God's truths become our benchmarks as we seek to understand life and how we should live it, even on the days when we're feeling lousy or sad.
- Then loving God becomes action by doing what God calls us to do: loving our neighbors.

If we are to love our neighbors as ourselves, then just who is my neighbor?" At another confrontation in Matthew when Jesus's adversaries were trying to trap him, they asked him that very question. Jesus responded with the parable of the Good Samaritan.

According to Jesus a "good neighbor" is one who shows unqualified mercy. Being a neighbor has nothing to do with nationality, religion, color, or class. Being a neighbor means sharing the mercy God gives to us with whomever we happen to encounter who needs mercy.

Jesus does not give us the option of choosing whom we will treat with mercy and compassion or whom we should love. God's purposes depend on us loving our neighbors as we love ourselves, whomever those neighbors may be, in the same way that God loves all of us.

God doesn't deal with us according to what we deserve but rather on the basis of who God is. God is love, and God loves us. To believe in Jesus's incarnation is to trust that we are loved. Trusting that we are loved, forgiven, and precious, we are much more likely to treat others as loved, forgiven, and precious children of God also. It's simple but not always easy.

When we trust that we are loved, then loving our neighbors as we love ourselves creates God's kingdom on earth. We have a sense of what it means for God's will to be done on earth as it is in heaven.

What matters, finally, is that we are called to action: to love God, our neighbors, ourselves. Jesus reminds the Jewish officials and us that life is not about following rules; it is about developing and sustaining loving relationships.