

October 29, 2017  
1 Thessalonians 2:1-8  
Matthew 22:34-40

Love. Just Love.

The Pharisees came to Jesus in order to test him. That's the whole reason that they came to see him. Not to learn from him or to understand him or discuss theology with him. But to test him. To stump him and befuddle him. And leave him speechless and embarrassed before the crowds. That's why they came to Jesus in our gospel reading from Matthew. They came to test Jesus and show him up. They came as the Sadducees, and Herodians had come. All these religious leaders who couldn't agree on anything together, they could agree on this: that Jesus was wrong. Wrong about their Bible, wrong about their God.

The Herodians came first with a question about paying taxes. It was a topic guaranteed to get Jesus in trouble with the Romans or with the Jews or with anyone of us, really, depending on how Jesus answered.

The Pharisees asked: should we pay taxes or not? "Look at your coins, said Jesus, Caesar's face is on them. So, give to Caesar what is Caesar's." The Herodians left: Curses, foiled again. Then the Sadducees came with a tricky question about resurrection: would a man married to

multiple women in this life have multiple wives in heaven? “Hold on, said Jesus, your question isn’t about heaven. You don’t understand heaven. In heaven, men and women will not belong to each other for everyone will belong to God.” Ooh, burn! So much for the Sadducees. So then the Pharisees sent a lawyer. Because lawyers are good at tricky questions. The lawyer asked, “Which of the commandments is the greatest?” Surely, they had Jesus with this one. Because no matter how Jesus responded, the lawyer could debate him. The lawyer could twist his answer. “So, you say the greatest command is not to murder,” the lawyer would say, “then what about stealing? Or is the greatest commandment not to commit adultery, well, then what about dishonoring your parents or lying or worshipping other gods?” Surely, the lawyer could make Jesus fumble. Surely, the lawyer could get Jesus flustered and make him look foolish (that Jesus--he thinks he’s so smart). When it comes to testing Jesus, maybe we know someone like the lawyer. Maybe we are the lawyer. Testing God’s limits. But Jesus knows all about lawyers. And he knows all about us. And he knows what the commandments are all about and what God is all about.

And it's all about Love. Just love. Love God. Love your neighbor. That's the greatest, most important thing that God commands us to do. Of course, the religious leaders and the lawyers, they knew that. Deep down, they knew Jesus was right. But arguing about it was what they were used to. They lived in a world of checking the right boxes and knowing the right answers. It's the same world we live in, where we have to get everything right. Where the world tests you and you have to prove that your family has it together. That you have it together. With your job. And your grades. And your relationships. And the right friends and the right resume and the right church membership and the right extracurriculars. You are right. You are on the right side of every argument. And on the right side of history. You are so very busy being right. But be careful, Jesus says. Because God doesn't want you to be right. God wants you to be faithful. God wants you to have the Spirit of God in you. To have the heart of Jesus. To love. Just love. Love God with every fiber of your being. Love your neighbor as yourself. Love directed heavenward. Love directed outward. In the shape of the cross. That's what it's all about.

Love. Just love, Jesus says. Love God, love your neighbor. These two things, they aren't different commandments. They are the same commandment. To love God is to love your neighbor. And to love your neighbor is to love God. But really, the lawyer in us says, really, it is two different things. It's multitasking. And no matter what anyone tells you, no one is good at multitasking. It would be easier if it was just one of those things. If we could just love God, that would be much easier. If we could love divine things and holy things. And we could cloister ourselves away from the world and all the annoying and terrible neighbors out there.

But Jesus says we must love God AND our neighbors. This is the cross-shaped love of Christ. Vertical and horizontal. And we begin by loving God. We begin by loving what is holy and good and mysterious. Loving the One who made us and all the universe. Who is so wonderful and so completely other. God's thoughts are higher than our thoughts. God's ways are different than our ways. Immortal, invisible, God-only-wise. I love that I cannot fully grasp God, except what I can grasp in Jesus, and even then, not always and not entirely. And I love that Jesus tells us to

love that. To love the purposes and the plans of the Creator that we can't possibly fathom, to love the Love we don't understand. It's all mystery and wonder. How much time do we spend loving that, just loving God? With heart, and mind, and spirit. Offering our thanks and our appreciation?

We are to love this amazing God of ours, who is holy and good. But here's the hard part: we are also to love our neighbors. And those around us who are not so mysterious and real and messy and weird. We know our neighbors all too well. Our flesh and blood neighbors who have no sense of what's appropriate or helpful or fashionable. But here is where the rubber hits the road. Here is where love takes on flesh. And we must love them. We must care for others and working alongside others in all their messiness and mistakenness. Accepting our neighbors as they are and looking out for them, no matter what. The letter of 1 John tells us that those who say they love God but hate their brothers and sisters are liars. We are liars if we aren't even trying to love our neighbors as ourselves.

We are to love holy and mysterious God. And we are to love our real, messy neighbors as ourselves. It's the vertical and the horizontal. The cross-shaped love of Christ. Around the world this week, Christians are celebrating the 500<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Protestant Reformation. What's THAT you say? Well, let me tell you in 30 seconds or less. On October 31, 1517, a young monk named Martin Luther posted 95 Theses or statements on the door of a Catholic church in Wittenburg Germany. He was voicing the concerns of many of those around him, that the church had gotten off track. That it was protecting the powerful. And tricking the weak. That it was so concerned with itself and its own holiness that it had forgotten the common, everyday message of Jesus. Which was for common, everyday people. That you should love God and love your common everyday neighbor. God's love wasn't just for priests and popes. God's love wasn't just for church. God's love in Jesus Christ was for everyone to abide in every day, in every part of life. Martin Luther said that "the word 'priest' should become as common as the word

Christian” because all Christians are priests.<sup>1</sup> All of us, he taught, carry the Holy Spirit within us. All of us who are baptized into Christ, we are, each of us, doing God’s work. Living out the love of God, the vertical and horizontal, cross-shaped love of Christ.

Love God. Love your neighbor. Love what is holy and what is human.

Love the eternal and love what is right now. Love the goodness that

pleases God. And love life’s imperfections. Because God has a cross-

shaped heart. Because of love, God takes a dirty manger as a crib for

himself. God takes common fishermen and widows and turns them

vessels of good news. God takes no-good enemies like Paul and turns

them into friends. God takes the cross and God takes suffering and God

takes the terror of death and turns them all into victory and new life. God

takes the unremarkable and the broken and the God-forsaken and says,

yes, I am here too. This also is where the heart of God resides.

That is what everything is all about. The cross-shaped love of God in

Jesus Christ. Which invites us to be part of that love. Father Richard

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<sup>1</sup> Martin Luther, *The Epistles of St. Peter and St. Jude: Preached and Explained* (New York, NY, Anson D.F. Randolph, 1859), 106.

Rohr, a Catholic priest and writer says, the love of God “is not something you bargain for or work for. It is something in which you participate.”<sup>2</sup> And that is what we do here as the church. We participate in God’s love. We do not earn love or accomplish love and or program love. Love is not a ticket, a qualification, a pass to heaven. Love is not something we control or possess. It’s something in which we are participating.

We are part of the give and take of God’s love. The vertical and the horizontal. And now more than ever, we must participate in that love. With all the fear and doubt and mistrust in the world. We must not turn our love in on itself. The apostle Paul writes to the church at Thessaloniki, asking them to participate in God’s love. He reminds them that he isn’t trying to make his quota or earn a bonus for himself. He isn’t selling them the love of God. And they can’t own it. They can only participate in it by giving it and receiving it.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://cac.org/love-is-who-you-are-2016-08-11/>



I've been among you like a nurse, Paul says. Like a nurse. Now that's not like a nurse now who works in the hospital or the doctor's office. Paul is talking about what a nurse used to be a long time ago. A wet nurse. A woman hired to nurse or breast feed another woman's baby. It was the custom then, for women who could afford it, to hire another woman as a nurse. The nurse would have been a servant or even a slave, and she would have cared for that baby through all the difficult nights and the long days of feeding and changing and carefully tending. It was not a glamorous job or a prestigious job or even a very respectable job. But it was an essential job. A life-giving, in-the-flesh job for the sake of the most vulnerable. Paul identifies himself as a nurse, as someone participating in God's love. A love that gives of its own body so other bodies can live. We love and we are loved. We give, and we receive. It is the vertical and the horizontal. The cross-shaped love of God in Jesus Christ.

The greatest commandment is this: Love God. Love your neighbor.

Love mystery and love reality. Love the sacred and love the common.

And participate every day in the great give and take of God's grace. And

let the Spirit of Christ live in you. Let the cross-shaped heart of Christ be your heart. And whatever you do, love. Just love.