

“When You Call the Question”  
Matthew 22:34-40  
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Sunday, October 29, 2017  
St. Timothy’s UMC- Jamestown, NC

Matthew 22:34-40, New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

**The Greatest Commandment**

***34** When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, **35** and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. **36** “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” **37** 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.’ **38** This is the greatest and first commandment. **39** And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ **40** On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”*

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I love this text! To me, this is the text of all texts when it comes to Good News, when it comes to The Gospel. Why? Because it tells us exactly what we are supposed to do, to love! Oh, how easy is that?

Here at the end of Matthew as Jesus begins his Holy Week in a rampant debate with the Sadducees, lawyers, chief priests, elders, scribes, Pharisees and their disciples, Jesus is at the heart of his verbal confrontation. Yet, out of these confrontations he becomes more clever and careful. He is clever and careful in a way that sets the pattern for our instruction and the instruction of His disciples.

Throughout this discourse Jesus becomes wiser and wiser. As the debate intensifies, his responses become more clever and the group of dissidents begins to silence. Almost with a breath of final concern the Pharisee asks the question to which I believe he thought would stump Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment of the law?”

Jesus’ answer was classic, “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."

After this answer, the Pharisees withdrew from the battle and soon after planned for The Master's demise.

What happens here is a dualistic occurrence. We as disciples are elated to hear the response and begin to love God, while at the same time discerning how to love our neighbor. Now, all said and done, this sounds rather simple as who in this room does not know how to love? The problem arises that we have lost the understanding of biblical love. Our culture, our society, has equated love with intense emotion. To love is a stronger response than to like, yet both are measures of a passive response to something outside of ourselves.

We like chocolate: we cannot help ourselves. We love a movie: it entertains or moves us. We love a boyfriend or girlfriend: they make us happy. We love a spouse: they complete us.

However, biblical love is not passive and it is *not* strictly emotional. In the Old Testament there are references to many kinds of love, but the love referred to here by Jesus is the love dictated in Deuteronomy, the law of love in Chapter 6, verse 5. It is the love of Yahweh. This is not a passive love, it is an active response of the faithful person to the love of God.

You see, too often in our society, our culture, our media, we have given way to the understanding that love is strictly passive and emotional. Quite the contrary, especially when it comes to the understanding of God's love. God's love is active. We see in the Old Testament that God "chooses or elects" to love Israel above all nations and to bring God's love to this chosen people. To love God with all one's heart, and soul, and mind, is to choose to respond to God even as God chooses to love us. Feelings and emotions do not enter into the equation.

Biblically, and predominantly in the New Testament, the principle word for love is "agape." Like "philia," or brotherly love, it is a passionless love. "Eros" is the word we use for the passionate love and desire in life. These latter two are used sparingly in the New Testament. Agape becomes our focal word in the gospels and has some connection to emotion where God cares for God's creatures and creation.

But, chiefly it refers to what we call “loving-kindness.” It is not a passive emotion, but active mercy! It is marked by patience and generosity, however clear that they are generated by the one who loves. As one commentator put it, “In short, loving is a choice, not a feeling.”

As we re-visit the text, to love God with all our heart, mind, and soul seems nearly impossible when we think of love as an emotion. How do you conjure up a good feeling of love for something as mysterious as the concept of God? We cannot look into God’s eyes, wrap our arms around the Spirit, or even give flowers to Jesus! If we could, that might evoke in us a profound feeling of love. We might fall in love with Jesus’ beauty and grace if we could know him like Mary and Martha. But we are commanded to love an intangible God.

Likewise, loving our neighbor is as difficult. If love is merely our passive response to the person next to us, we are more often repulsed than moved to love. How can one legitimately look into the face of an enemy and feel unqualified love? It is nearly impossible.

But, here we go again, biblical love is not passive! It is not something that occurs to us without our control or will. Biblical love is something we do! It is loving kindness; merciful action that is both generous and continuous in all that we do. Herein is the good news for Christian people. “To love neighbor as oneself is to act toward the other as one would act toward those close to you.”

When the action to each is equal, the love to each is equal. In Robert’s Rules of Order, when you define, “Calling the Question” this is what it says, “Sometimes the mere making of a motion for the Previous Question or ‘call for the question’ may motivate unanimous consent to ending debate.” That my friends is what I believe Jesus was doing at this point in his ministry with these who fought so adamantly against him. Jesus was ready to end the debate. Jesus was ready for them to hear the final and proper word: Love God, Love one another the same!

Jesus was ready to “Call the question, to end the debate and move on.” How ready are we to “Call the question” to hate, violence, discrimination, intolerance, war, and such? Are we ready to love our neighbor in a way that magnifies our love for God?

The Reverend J. Scott Turner, priest in charge of St. Martha’s Episcopal Church in Westminster, Colorado puts it this way,

“I pray for the church to trust in the endless horizon of God, in whom all things are possible. God is in charge, and if hearts are to be changed toward love of neighbor, God will need our trust-and our best abilities to till the soil.”

My friends, the time is right. Love God, love your neighbor, keep your hearts open and trust in the Lord God Almighty in order that when the question is called, we are there ready to end the debate and love unconditionally.

AMEN & AMEN.