

The Great Commandments

Year A, Proper 25 (30), Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost, October 25, 2020
Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18; Psalm 1; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46

[*Riff*: I love a good question.]

A great question can open doors to surprising truths and deeper friendship. But the dynamite is all in the response. Depending on the response, questions can fizzle out or ignite a powder keg.

Today Matthew places us at ground zero, when Jesus blew up the temple with his response to a lawyer's question. Jesus had just cleansed the temple and returned to teach there. By the time we get to our bit in the story today, Jesus's authority has been repeatedly questioned by chief priests and elders, Pharisees and Herodians, Sadducees, and finally, by a Bible professor. Our translation says lawyer, but that's a bit misleading – this was a professor of the Mosaic law, a Torah teacher. This Bible professor was a lot like me.

And I think his question is a terrific one. I definitely would have asked Jesus this if I were in the temple. Not to test him hopefully, but to ask: “which commandment in the law is the greatest?”

This question is the culmination of all the previous questions about authority, paying taxes, and the resurrection (which the lectionary skipped over today, unfortunately). Today's question gets right to the heart of the law. And Jesus's response was nuclear.

Matthew tells us that after Jesus responded, from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions. This morning I want to unpack for us how Jesus' response is like a grand finale at a fireworks show, only this show is in the temple. Jesus's response gathers together Law, Love, and Lordship in a way that blows off the temple roof.

Let's start with **Law**. The first snap of Jesus's response shows that he delights in the law. Jesus names the prayer of Israel, the Shema, as the greatest and first commandment: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” To answer the bible teacher's question, Jesus quotes from Deuteronomy 6:5. He doesn't make up a new command, but he draws from the love commandment that is prefaced by “Hear O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone.” For those who thought Jesus's teachings undermined the law, his response resounds with a pop in the temple. Here Jesus lights on the central text for Jewish life and worship. And then he doubles down in good rabbinic fashion by linking this command with the command from Leviticus 19 about neighbor love (today's Old Testament lesson).

Jesus is firmly rooted in Hebrew Scripture and so is his answer. He is like a tree, planted by streams of water, as the psalmist sings. By likening the commandment to love God with loving your neighbor as yourself, Jesus forever unites love of God and love of neighbor. Love is the purpose of the law and the prophets. Love is the end game. For Jesus, the law and the prophets are all about loving God and loving our neighbor.

So the first thing we learn from Jesus's response today is despite all the things Jesus has been saying and doing among the Jewish people, Jesus trusts the law. And even more, Jesus delights in the law, and it's love that gives the law its shape.

This leads to a second dynamism to Jesus's response, Love. We've already seen that Jesus delights in the law and that love gives the law its shape, but what does Jesus mean by love? What does it look like to love your neighbor? By drawing from Leviticus, Jesus shows us where to go for this answer.

The book of Leviticus is all about holiness and here in ch.19 we get a laser focus on what holiness looks like, and it looks like love. Our lectionary only gives us a slice of what neighbor love looks like; there are actually several precepts offered between verses 9-18. But the three we do have are more than enough to give us a sense of what Jesus means by "love your neighbor as yourself." Here they are:

1. Love requires justice. Justice has been getting a lot of press lately in the U.S., more so for the ways in which justice is not being served. Unjustified police killings have reached a tipping point for many Americans who are crying out for justice. The killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and just this week, 19-year-old Marcellis Stinnette, an unarmed Black man who was killed by a police officer in Waukegan, Illinois, all display a devastating lack of justice. And what Leviticus shows us today is that there is no neighbor love without justice. If there is no loving of our neighbor without justice, Christians must be committed to justice.

The reason why Leviticus clarifies that justice must be applied to the rich also is because it would be easy to conclude based on the previous precepts in Leviticus 19, that God only cares for the poor. But love requires that partiality not be shown. This does not mean that nothing needs to be said on behalf of the poor. It's the poor after all, who are often treated unjustly. But treating the poor justly does not entail injustice for the rich just as celebrating Black lives does not entail a disregard for other lives. In the kingdom of God, justice is not on short supply.

So the first thing we learn about how to love our neighbor is that we must treat our neighbor justly. Love requires justice.

2. Love requires involvement. Love requires that we not stand by when our neighbor is being wronged. This is what is meant by the oddly translated phrase, "and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor." The Hebrew means that when our neighbor is in danger, love compels us to get involved.

One of the unfortunate assumptions about pacifism is that pacifists are passive. But a commitment to non-violence is not a free pass to avoid conflict. Christians who are committed to non-violence are so because of who we understand God in Christ to be. But make no mistake, a commitment to non-violence is not the way of safety or cowardice. Jesus is the obvious example here, but one Christian group today that embodies this so beautifully is the Christian Peacemaker Teams that come out of the Mennonite tradition.

In the face of war, of lethal conflict, Christian Peacemaker teams get involved. They serve meals, convene gatherings, mediate arguments, and love their enemies in real time. Here's how they describe their work (<https://www.cpt.org/about>): "These teams support and amplify the voices of local peacemakers who risk injury and death by waging nonviolent direct action to confront systems of violence and oppression." Christian Peacemaker teams are committed to non-violence, but they are anything but conflict averse. They get involved.

Christian Peacemaker Teams love their neighbor, sometimes at great costs to themselves. They live in a way that sounds a lot like Paul in our reading from 1 Thessalonians today. He says, "You yourselves know, brothers and sisters, that our coming to you was not in vain, but though we had already suffered and been shamefully mistreated in Philippi, as you know, we had courage in our God to declare to you the gospel of God in spite of great opposition" (2:1-2).
Love gets involved.

3. Love requires forgiveness. There is no room for vengeance or grudge holding in loving our neighbor. We must forgive. Without forgiveness, we cannot love our neighbor. And if we cannot love our neighbor, we cannot follow Jesus.

Forgiveness can be hard because wrongs can be so devastating. But we cannot allow our hurt to keep us from God. The fireworks in forgiveness is that forgiveness sets *you* free from hate and its death grip. Grudge holding, brooding over previous wrongs, plans to get back at someone, are all death dealing ways to live. They not only keep us from loving our neighbor, but they keep us from loving ourselves.

Forgiveness is the most practical way to love our neighbor and our self. Every week here at St. Paul's we have a time we call the passing of the peace. What this time really is is forgiveness time. Are you going to keep holding that grudge against your wife, your dad, your boss, your enemy, or are you going to choose forgiveness? Are you going to receive the gift of forgiveness to love your neighbor and your self?

So Leviticus teaches us that loving our neighbor requires justice, love requires involvement, and love requires forgiveness. And here's where the big boom of Jesus's response blows the roof off the temple. In his response to the Bible teacher about the greatest commandment in the law, Jesus sums up not only the law and the prophets, he not only clarifies God's command to love, but he reveals himself to be the Lord who makes this all possible. Let me explain.

Lordship. The strange add-on about David's Son is not an add-on at all; it's actually the key to fulfilling the commandment. The gospel announces that God has changed everything in Christ. In Jesus's stumper about David's prophecy, he reveals himself not only to be the Messiah, but the one who makes it possible for us to "be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy."

We already know that Jesus has Leviticus 19 in mind. The refrain of Leviticus 19 following nearly every precept is "I am the Lord." This is repeated fifteen times! We only get it 3 times in our lesson today, but that's because we only got a slice of chapter 19. The idea here is that Israel is to be holy, Israel is to love, because God is holy. God is love. Leviticus shows us that love is the stuff of holiness and that God wants us to be holy. Matthew's version of this invitation is to

“be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.” This seems to be an impossible command until we realize that Jesus makes it possible for us to be like God. And he does this by setting us free to love God, our neighbor, and our self.

Jesus makes love possible because he has conquered sin, death, and the devil and put them “under his feet” as the psalmist prophesied. This same Lord Jesus requires justice, gets involved, and forgives without end. Through his ministry, death, resurrection, and sending of his Spirit he makes it possible for us to do the same. The good news is that Jesus is Lord and he is with us to the end of the age, empowering us to be like him.

In the midst of a pandemic, a divisive presidential election, and ongoing police brutality, Jesus makes it possible for us to fulfill the greatest commandment to love, because Jesus is Lord.