

“The Love Triangle”

WORDS of FAITH: LOVE

Deuteronomy 6:4-9 and Matthew 22:34-40

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Madison WI

Rev. Charlie Berthoud

Our first reading is one of the best known in the Hebrew Scriptures. These words collectively known as the Shema, which is the Hebrew word for hear.

Inspired by these words, many Jewish homes have small scroll-like objects on the doorposts, called mezzuzahs—to help people remember that God is one and that we are called to love God with all our heart.

Within the Hebrew scriptures, there are many laws, over 600. Questions have arisen over the years as to whether they are of equal importance, or if some are more important than others.

It’s a valid question. Is the commandment to love God of the same importance as Leviticus 19:19, which teaches us you shall not “put on a garment made of two different materials.” So is wearing an all cotton shirt as important as loving God?

Jesus was asked which commandments are most important. And he replied with the well-known teaching, which is our gospel lesson today: love God and love your neighbor as yourself.

This teaching appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but with variations. In Luke, a lawyer tests Jesus with questions about neighbors, and after teaching about loving God and neighbor, Jesus replies with the parable of the Good Samaritan. In Mark it is part of a pleasant conversation with religious leaders. In Matthew, the love commandment is set in a lengthy section of contentious interactions between the religious leaders and Jesus.

On my spiritual journey, I’ve reached a point where I do think that some commandments are more important. And I’ve learned that certain Bible verses may not be appropriate in every context.

Many years ago at a family wedding, my mother—a faithful member of the Presbyterian church her whole life, may she rest in peace—was asked to read Matthew 22:34-40, our gospel reading for today, about love.

Unfortunately, she opened the Bible not to Matthew 22, but to Matthew 23 verse 34, which is in the middle of Jesus denouncing the hypocrisy of the religious leaders. So at this family wedding, my mom began to read:

Therefore I send you prophets, sages, and scribes, some of whom you will kill and crucify, and some you will flog in your synagogues and pursue from town to town.

After a sentence or two, she stopped and said, “I’m reading from the wrong chapter.” So she flipped back, but unfortunately passed Matthew 22:34 and went to Matthew 21:34, which is in the middle of one of the most challenging parables of Jesus. So at the wedding, my mom read:

When the harvest time had come, the landowner sent his slaves to the tenants to collect his produce. But the tenants seized his slaves and beat one, killed another, and stoned another.

So it was a little awkward. Fortunately the pastor was able to deftly seamlessly weave the love commandment into her sermon.

Listen now for the reading from Matthew 22.

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” 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.’ 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.”

“A threefold cord is not quickly broken.” So we read in Ecclesiastes 4:12. I heard these words at a wedding years ago, and the couple chose the verse, hoping that they could weave a strong marriage, with the two of them plus God.

Braiding three strings together makes a strong rope. I like the image of two married people plus God, but I have another idea about three cords being bound together.

The term “love triangle” usually means trouble. But in our reading today, a love triangle is a strong and healthy love—of God, of neighbor, of self.

Jesus weaves together these three kinds of love, telling his followers that they are the most important.

Love is clearly at the center of the Christian life. It’s at the center of our letterhead: Learning, Loving, Living. We are a community of people trying to learn about God’s love, so that we can live God’s love.

The little book of 1 John has many teachings on loving God and neighbor.

See what love God has given us, that we should be called children of God.

How does God's love abide in anyone who has the world's goods and sees a brother or sister in need and yet refuses help?

Little children, let us love, not in word or speech, but in truth and action.

Interestingly, the book ends not with more teaching about love, not with farewells and blessings, but with this: "Little children, keep yourselves from idols." That's right, idols. As in do not worship idols or any false gods.

A vital part of faithful living is avoiding too much love for idols, for the wrong things— our screens and gadgets, our jobs, our money, our routines, alcohol, sports, clothes, or whatever—and instead learning to love the right things in the right way.

If we can find the right balance of loving God, neighbor, and self, we'll be doing OK.

Sometimes we get out of balance, individually and even as churches.

If we have love of God out of balance, we ignore people in need and spend too much time in our religious bunkers, seeking God's protection, thinking too much of ourselves.

If we have love of self out of balance, we spend too much time, energy, and money on ourselves, and we don't take the reality of sin seriously. Or we think of faith only as a personal ticket to heaven.

If we have love of neighbor out of balance, we find ourselves frantically trying to do everything for everyone, on our own, not taking care of ourselves, not staying connected to God.

The love commandment invites us to balance and prioritize love. Maybe that's your prayer word this week. Maybe as you walk in the morning or do your weight-lifting or yoga, or as you wash the dishes or drive around town, you simply think of the word love. Maybe you remember the teaching from Deuteronomy and talk about love with your family, or remember God's love as you walk through the doorway in your house.

Sometimes surprising situations arise, giving us the opportunity to be loving.

Hurricane Harvey caused great damage and chaos in Texas. A young couple named Dayna and Josh were scheduled to be married, but they had to postpone. They had planned a large celebration dinner at a local community center for family and friends.

But instead, since the food had already arrived and the party was off, they served the food to hurricane evacuees, staying at the community center.

I think if we regularly ponder love of God, neighbor, and self, we'll find ourselves being creative with our love, like Dayna and Josh.

I realize that in talking about love today I've mentioned several weddings. I want to be clear that I know not everyone is married and not everyone has a happy experience of marriage but I think the principles go beyond the love of a marriage vow. So with that in mind I want to conclude with a little bit more about marriage.

When I do pre-marital counseling, one of the first questions I usually ask is: Would you tell me about what dinner was like for you when you were about 10 years old? For some people family dinner was a tense and difficult time, with too much arguing, too much TV, too much alcohol, and not enough love. For other people, dinner is a time of experiencing family love—with pleasant conversation, genuine interest in each other, and a time to give thanks to God.

In the marriage ceremony itself, I often remind couples that love is both a noun and verb—something we feel and something we are called to do. I often remind them that God’s love for us gives us the strength we need to love each other and to love ourselves.

And at the conclusion of a wedding, after the announcement of marriage (and perhaps a public display affection), I send the couple out with a blessing. I often talk about how well dressed they are, about how much effort they put into their clothes for the wedding day, and then I share words from Colossians 3, encouraging them to be mindful of their clothing every day:

As God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.... Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.

The Good News of the Gospel is the God loves us. Our calling, our task is to welcome this love and share it, every day. Amen.

