

Love: Part One
Matthew 22: 37-40
January 11, 2015
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Our text today is one of 13 scriptures this congregation has identified this year as a core text for who we are. As most of you know, we took time through the late summer and early fall to identify bible passages that are meaningful to us as individuals and households. And we took time to tell stories about these with each other at our church retreat. Through all this listening, and some rather unscientific data work we identified 13 bible passages that are especially important to us. We have experienced energy and interest in this conversation and we trust that energy has resulted in a list that is meaningful to us. Yet we also recognize that, being CMCL, how can a list really ever be complete? It may change. We may ask through the coming weeks if these texts really are *it*, or if there are others that speak more clearly to the heart of who we are as a community of faith.

Regardless, these texts will guide our worship for the next several weeks, and then again after Lent and Easter.

I was going to start out this morning by saying that today's passage, the Greatest Commandment, sort of speaks for itself. I wrote that it is clear concise and to the point. I thought we maybe didn't need a sermon to help us understand it. That may be true. Or at least, words may not be what best helps us internalize this wisdom in our lives.

But then I got an email from a CMCLer who had listed this as one of the most influential bible passages to her. And she had this to say about it:

My heart breaks when I hear this verse and remember the days of reciting it over and over drowning in the life of legalism I lived in. I created so many "laws" concerning 'Loving the Lord with all my heart.' If I love God, I have to... Read, pray, tithe, serve... And I thought I never loved my neighbor enough because I didn't evangelize, convert, convince, and ultimately purify my neighbor as well. All along I never realized this is nothing of what love is.

This person's reflections on how this text once impacted her life reminds me how vital it is to keep reflecting together as a community of faith what scripture means to us in this time and place. It reminds me not to take for granted or assume what each person brings in the room this morning or what you each hear when we read these verses. My prayer is that something of what we bring you this morning sheds new light on this familiar teaching. My prayer is that God touches your heart in a fresh way in this time this morning. Listen again to this powerful teaching of Jesus. Listen for a word or phrase that holds your attention.

Jesus 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.’

I want to give us three angles of approach to this text this morning. Each angle may offer a new way of seeing the text, or add a layer of meaning to the text.

The first angle

The Greatest Commandment is a fitting start to this series not only because Jesus himself said all the scriptures hang on these two commandments, but more profoundly, this teaching is mirrored in nearly every other major religious tradition. From Baha’i to Buddhism and Judaism to Jainism, nearly all religions teach some version of the Golden Rule akin to this.

Some of you are familiar with Karen Armstrong, the internationally recognized religion scholar, and her Charter for Compassion launched with a TED talk several years ago.

What I’ve found, across the board, is that religion is about behaving differently. Instead of deciding whether or not you believe in God, first you do something. You behave in a committed way, and then you begin to understand the truths of religion... And in particular, every single one of the major world traditions has highlighted -- has said -- and put at the core of their tradition what’s become known as the Golden Rule. First propounded by Confucius five centuries before Christ: "Do not do to others what you would not like them to do to you." That, he said, was the central thread which ran through all his teaching...

And... there’s a famous story about the great rabbi, Hillel, the older contemporary of Jesus. A pagan came to him and offered to convert to Judaism if the rabbi could recite the whole of Jewish teaching while he stood on one leg. Hillel stood on one leg and said, “That which is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. That is the Torah. The rest is commentary. Go and study it.”

Armstrong goes on to reflect on the role of religion on the 21st-century geopolitical context where so much violence continues to happen in the name of religion.

People want to be religious, and religion should be made to be a force for harmony in the world, which it can and should be -- because of the Golden Rule. “Do not do to others what you would not have them do to you”: an ethos that should now be applied globally. We should not treat other nations as we would not wish to be treated ourselves.[1]

Moreover, around the same time as Armstrong’s TED talk, Muslim scholars from around the world came together to write an appeal to Christian leaders for more compassionate relationships between the two faiths. At the heart of their document, called A Common Word, they appealed to the common teaching to love one’s neighbor as grounds for global collaboration between Muslims and Christians. They quote the Prophet Muhammad who taught: “None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself.”[2]

These projects proclaim that the most valuable asset Christianity has to offer the world in

this geopolitical moment is the Greatest Commandment. This is a profound truth to grab hold of in a week when yet more deadly terrorist attacks loosely ascribed to religious motivations have played out across the news.

What can we learn from other faith traditions about what it means to love our neighbors as ourselves? What wisdom do we yet need to learn about this?

The second angle

This fall, if all goes according to plan, 3 or 4 recent college graduates will move to Lancaster City to spend a year striving to live out the Greatest Commandment in very tangible ways. As the inaugural participants in The Shalom Project, a new service-learning program being developed here and modeled after the PULSE program in Pittsburgh (and MVS and Lutheran Volunteer Corps, etc.), these individuals will move into an intentional shared household in an intentionally chosen neighborhood; will dedicate their working hours to organizations and businesses committed to the common good; and will take time every week to learn about themselves and this city, to discuss ethics and theology and spirituality in the context of their daily lives and to deepen relationships with each other.

Randy Newswanger and I are part of the leadership team developing this new program in partnership with several Mennonite congregations in Lancaster City. Randy and I have invited our church Council to consider how CMCL might support and partner with The Shalom Project, especially in this start-up year of the program. We invite each of you to consider this with us as well and to join in the conversation with us one-on-one, through your Council members, etc.

As we have developed a vision for The Shalom Project, we shaped it around three branches of this teaching of Jesus – learning to love God, learning to love our selves and learning to love our neighbors. We believe that service learning in a faith-based perspective should be about all three of these. Notice we frame all of them in a posture of learning. We do not take for granted that people of faith have “arrived” with any of these three – whether they come to the program as participants or as staff or board members or whatever. As I mentioned earlier, an email from a CMCLer this weekend reminded me not to assume we know what love is about. It can be misconstrued into all sorts of stuff, especially when it comes to service learning contexts: self-righteousness; institutional preservation; white privilege. The list could probably go on.

The Shalom Project strives for a posture of learning. We know many people come of age wondering if God and religion have anything to offer their lives. We know many people have not learned to love themselves in healthy ways that free them to show compassion for others. And we know that being plopped down in a new neighborhood does not inherently make for loving relationships with neighbors. We will be learning how to love God, self and neighbor.

There are probably a plethora of ways one could use the Greatest Commandment as a framework for programs to do good in the world. The Shalom Project is one that is coming to our doorstep this year.

It is a tricky business turning wisdom into program. There is a danger of losing

something. Yet, it seems to me this teaching of Jesus is nothing if not a command to make faith tangible. Jonathan Sauder, reflecting by email this week about why this text is important to him and his family, wrote, “Spirituality must be very very this worldly and be constituted by our relationships with people in order to be valid. Jesus conflates love of God and love of humans. Too often religion puts Principle or Right or Morality or God's Will ahead of the needs of hurting people.”

Jonathan might wonder if we can turn this truth into programs. But this is our humble attempt to put hands and feet to this core teaching.

What will we learn from this small band of brave recent college graduates who sign up to move to Lancaster for a program being built in real time? What could we learn about the wisdom of Jesus by welcoming and walking alongside these new neighbors in their journeys for a while?

The third angle

You will notice that I entitled this sermon “Love: Part One.” This is because five of the 13 texts on the list CMCL developed this fall are explicitly about love. The Greatest Commandment actually comes into the list twice – first on its own in Matthew’s gospel, and then we also have on the list the parable of the Good Samaritan, which includes this teaching.

Now for the harder part of the sermon. A challenge to end on, since there will be more discussion about love passages in the weeks to come.

Nearly 20 years ago biblical scholar Richard Hays wrote what some have considered the definitive book on Christian ethics in the late 20th-century, called *The Moral Vision of the New Testament*. For me, it is both the most thorough introduction to biblical ethics, but also the most clear and systematic approach to this topic. He takes time to carefully sort through each writing of the New Testament and outline the prominent ethical themes. And then he does what I found both the most helpful and the most provocative of his work – he takes this hodgepodge of writings, everything from the gospels to the book of Revelation, and searches for the most important ethical themes that run through all the writings. He comes out with three main images for New Testament ethics: the cross, community and new creation.[3]

Now, here is the part this is a challenge for today. He takes a few pages to explain why “love” is not in his thinking a central ethical theme or image in the New Testament.

Hays says,

Some readers will be surprised to find that I have not proposed love as a unifying theme for New Testament ethics. It is widely supposed that love is the basic message of the New Testament.[4]

And he goes on to note briefly all the places it is described as a major them, many of them are represented in the five bible passages about love that have made it into CMCL’s list. But he also goes on to show that several of the most important NT writers don’t reference love much at all. It is a very minor theme in the gospel of Mark, the earliest writing about the life and teaching of Jesus. And the word never even appears in the book

of Acts.

But maybe more importantly, Hays explains that love has actually become a pretty vague notion in pop culture. What do we really mean when we talk about love?

He says,

The term has become debased in popular discourse; it has lost its power of discrimination, having become a cover for all manner of vapid self-indulgence. As Stanley Hauerwas has observed, “The ethics of love is often but a cover for what is fundamentally an assertion of ethical relativism.”... [But] The biblical story teaches us that God’s love cannot be reduced to “inclusiveness”: authentic love calls us to repentance, discipline, sacrifice, and transformation. We can recover the power of love only by insisting that love’s meaning is to be discovered in the New Testament’s story of Jesus—therefore, in the cross.[5]

What does love mean to us in the faith community? Thinking of the CMCLer I quoted at the beginning, what does discipline, sacrifice and transformation mean, if it does not mean legalism?

As we revisit many familiar bible verses about love in the coming weeks, I invite you to go deeper with them. Don’t just sit at the surface. And don’t assume it is self-evident what these rich, wise teachings mean when they talk of love. Look for the unexpected. Don’t shy away from the challenging stuff. Look for what, in the words of Richard Hays, calls us to transformation.

The Prophet Muhammad says, “None of you has faith until you love for your neighbor what you love for yourself.”

The Talmud says, “That which is despicable to you, do not do to your fellow, this is the whole Torah, and the rest is commentary, go and learn it.”

Jesus 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.’

[1] Karen Armstrong, “My Wish: Charter for Compassion,” TED Talk (Feb. 2008).

Transcript available online at:

https://www.ted.com/talks/karen_armstrong_makes_her_ted_prize_wish_the_charter_for_compassion/transcript?language=en. Accessed Jan. 10, 2015.

[2] See “A Common Word between Us and You.” Online at:

<http://www.acommonword.com/the-acw-document/>. Accessed Jan. 10, 2015.

[3] Richard B. Hays, *The Moral Vision of the New Testament: Community, Cross New Creation, A Contemporary Introduction to New Testament Ethics* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996), pp. 187-205.

[4] Hays, 200.

[5] Hays, 202.