A Sermon for DaySpring

by Eric Howell

*Nitty Gritty Love*

Matthew 22:34-46

October 25, 2020

As we worship together this morning, October 25, 2020, it’s a good day to celebrate some things. For the whole month of October, we met in person. It’s the first time we can say that in a long time, and it’s worth celebrating. Each week, I think we’ve had more and more people who join in for this as well as a robust online community of worshippers each week. We’ve made it one month. There is much to celebrate.

The weather has cooperated, very nicely in fact. We haven’t had to cancel because of rain, wind, cold, or as it could be in central Texas, oppressive, false-fall heat wave.

Covid numbers have also cooperated. Covid gives us very little to celebrate, but we can at least be grateful that the opening of schools and universities in this area has not produced the kind of spike in infection rates that we experienced in the summer when we couldn’t make it through one month of meeting together. Weather has cooperated. Covid spread has remained somewhat at bay.

You get credit as well. You’ve been such an easy going, happy group, willing to do what we need to do in terms of the adjustments we have to make to meet together. When it comes to Covid, you’re a sensible, compassionate, no drama group, and I don’t take that for granted.

This has also been made possible by those who come early to set up everything. A word of gratitude for folks who set up the sound and audio for the service. If we’re going to keep doing this for another month or longer, we’ll need to widen and enlarge that group of people who serves the church in this way. We’ve gone from needing one person each week to run sound to a group of 4-5 each week. Before, we could get by with 5-6 people on the Chart to take turns for this. Now that’s got to at least double, maybe triple. We’ve gotten off to a great start; now we need to create a sustainable way of keeping it going.

All of this has come together by the mercy of God to give us a month. In a season where there may not be much to celebrate all the time, we celebrate this. Thanks be to God, we’ve been given a month. I don’t know if we’ll be given another month or a season or what the future will hold, but we’ve been given one. And that’s a tremendous start. Thanks be to God. Let all the people say, “Amen”

Thinking back to October 4, our first day together out here in the trees was the Feast Day of St. Francis of Assisi, which seemed to be a special connection, gathering out here under the Cathedral of Oaks since Francis is the patron saint of ecology, known for his love of God through the natural world and known for his love of neighbor no matter who they were. He preached to birds and kissed lepers. He prayed with brother sun and sister moon and embraced radical poverty to be free from possessions to love others with everything he had. In both ways he’s an outstanding, saintly model for us to follow. And so, on his feast day we remembered the simple prayer he prayed late into the night, “My God, my all.” His prayer wasn’t the half-committed prayer of the conveniently religious. “My God, my some;” “My God, my sometimes;” “My God, my partways.” This is the prayer of the all-in, the committed, not the perfected, but the one who understands the way of Jesus is the way of total love.

Francis’ prayer, and the spirit behind it has remained with us through the Sundays of this month. Remember *give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and give to God what is God’s*? Everything is God’s, even everything that Caesar thinks he has dominion over.

“My God, my all” is with us today as we come to the question Pharisees posed to Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment?”

I don’t know how the Pharisees thought Jesus was going to answer when they asked him this. It’s not clear to me how this is a trap like the other questions he was asked in this ongoing examination of Jesus by the religious leadership, or what would have been considered a wrong answer. Is this a test? Is this a riddle of some sort? It’s not clear. It is clear that he could have easily answered in different, defensible ways. *You shall have no other God’s before me*. That would be a good greatest commandment. Or *honor the Sabbath and keep it holy*, or *You must be circumcised*. Those were the commands that made Israel distinguished from its neighbors.

Yet, Jesus wasn’t the first to answer the way he did. In answering the way he did, he placed himself squarely in the heart of Jewish faith. But then he went even further. What is the greatest commandment? I’ll give you two, and then I’ll give you something else to think about.

Love the Lord your God with your all. Love the Lord your God with you heart, your soul, your mind. That’s one.

Love your neighbor as yourself. That’s two.

The first is from Deuteronomy, the second is from Leviticus. These are deeply, richly, thoroughly old testament teachings. Love God and love one another.

Then Jesus adds: On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets. He goes beyond a simple answer to the profound meaning of the answer. On the love of God and love of neighbor everything else is built. This is the foundation of the whole structure; the root of the whole tree; the ground of all being. Everything else we do for God or for neighbor is rooted in love.

This is more than about how we feel or what we do. It is about who we are. What does it mean to be human? This means that we are people who are shaped by core relationships of love. Love for others is the crucible that fires the love of God. The love of God is what makes possible and animates the love of neighbor. This is a profound thing to believe about life. Evolutionary theory teaches that the core relationship between beings is competition with one another for scarce resources. Ancient religions taught the core relationship of humans with the gods is obedience in hope that the gods may return to us something good. Constitutional politics says our relationships are determined by our rights to have freedom from one another. Capitalism teaches the core relationship of the human with the world is desire and consumption.

But the teaching of Israel’s faith, amplified by Jesus, is the core relationships we have with God and one another and the foundation of those relationships is love. God is love, and the world God brought into being is bound together by more than gravity; it is bound together by divine love. This is a profound thing to believe.

Leviticus gets very specific about what this means: You shall not go around slandering people. You shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor. You shall not hate in your heart anyone. You shall reprove your neighbor or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge, but you shall love you neighbor as yourself.

Leviticus has a very practical vision that our lives are embedded in the kind of community in which we can confront one another. We can speak into one another’s lives and bear no grudges and harbor no hatred. Loving one another is not just a warm feeling or costless acceptance of one another. It’s harder than that. Love in the nitty gritty of life. This is the great insight of the law and prophets about human community. Love is in the hard stuff of life, or it is nothing at all.

Love requires everything from you or it is not yet the fullness of love.

Ram Dass and Paul Gorman in their book *How Can I Help* share a story from a woman who took her aging mother into her home. The mother had had a stroke and needed time to recover. The daughter was very dutiful and attentive to her mother’s every need. Yet, a terrible fight broke out—over a hard-boiled egg. As you know, it wasn’t really about a hard-boiled egg. In the middle of the escalating battle, the mother stopped short and asked, “Why are you doing all of this for me anyway?”

The daughter began to list reasons: “I was afraid for her: I wanted her to get well; I felt maybe I’d ignored her when I was younger; I needed to show her I was strong; I needed to get her ready for going home alone; old age; and on and on. I amazed myself. I could have gone on giving reasons all night. Even she was impressed, [so I thought]

‘Junk’ she said when I was done.

‘Junk?’

‘Yes, junk’ she said again, but a little more quietly. And that little more quietly tone got me. She went on. ‘You don’t have to have all those reasons. We love each other. That’s enough.’

I felt like a child again. Having your parents show you something that’s true, but you don’t feel put down—you feel better, because it is true, and you know it, even though you are a child. I said, ‘you’re right, you’re really right. I’m sorry.’ She said, ‘Don’t be sorry. Junk is fine. It’s what you don’t need anymore. I love you.’” (quoted in John Shea, *Matthew,* 309)

This love in this story, worked out between these two, Love, worked out in Leviticus, and Love, embodied by Jesus isn’t just a good feeling toward God or toward neighbor. It’s what we do and who we are when those feelings aren’t always there. *My God, my all*. My God, my best and my worst days, my high hopes and my great fears, my celebrations and laments, my belief, my unbelief. My neighbor, on your best days and you’re not so great; when you give back and when you just take; when you join me in celebration, when you bring me to tears. My God, my neighbor, my love, my all.

What we learn along the way of life is that love isn’t just a romantic ideal. It’s the nitty gritty. It’s the hard stuff.

Jenny, my wife, teaches a course at the World Hunger Farm each week. Some of you are in it. More of you would love to be in it if you could be, I’m sure. She told a story from this week that reminded me of all of this. They were talking about nature and poetry and the blissful joy of being in creation on a beautiful October Central Texas day. The question was asked, “What does nature sound like?” And they were to sit in silence contemplating this question. How would you answer? I would’ve thought about a waterfall crashing on the rocks below in a national park, or the wind in the trees; distant thunder rolling on a summer’s evening. As the class sat prayerfully contemplating, ‘what does nature sound like?” just then, it was time on the schedule for one of the farm workers came to the nearby pen to feed the pigs. There’s a reason why it’s called slopping the pigs. Have you ever heard a pig eat? They’re all in, snout, teeth, tongue, up to their ears in the buckets of leftovers poured out over the fence. Pigs are not dainty. Grunting, snorting, slurping. What does nature sound like? Sounds like contemplation interrupted by a bunch of pigs slopping. What does nature sound like? Like a waterfall and a gentle breeze and the grunting of pigs? It’s not always pretty.

It is this way with love, too. What does love sound like? It sounds like affirmation and sometimes confrontation. It sounds like forgiveness and sometimes like challenge. It sounds like honey-drips and sometimes like sharp thunder cracking.

But in everything, Love sounds like, “I’m still here. I will never leave you nor forsake you. I’m for you. I give my life for you.” The cross is the ultimate sign of love and its concrete embodiment. The cross was definitely not pretty, but the cross is where Jesus laid down his life for his friends. For you and for me. This is love. And you are beloved.

So, I wonder what you need to hear the most today? What does your heart need to hear the very most? Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. You are loved.

In these moments of silence, I invite the Holy Spirit to speak to each of us just what we need to hear the very most as we prepare to come before the table to receive the gifts of the Lord in love and in grace.

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