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“Hanging on the Law of Love”
Matthew 22:34-46
by Rev. Meghan Davis
Longview Presbyterian Church
October 23, 2011

Pastor Juanita Campbell Rasmus¹ tells of how, as a child she was a strict rule follower. I would guess that many of us here today could say the same of ourselves. She explains, “As a child I always followed the rules. I remember thinking when classmates broke the rules, *Well, I won’t get caught doing that because I’m a good Christian.* I would distance myself from playmates who got in trouble because the rules says you’re known by the company you keep. I based my relationship with God on rule-keeping because I wanted to be a ‘good’ girl.”

Now, many years later, Juanita serves a church where she works with all kinds of rule breakers. As she describes, “I have met all the people I didn’t play with as a little girl. I have met drug dealers, addicts, prostitutes, bail jumpers, adulterers, liars, thieves, white collar criminals, you name it! The church is filled with people that I would have ruled out as a young girl, because the church is filled with rule breakers.” But it is the mission of her congregation to “tear down the walls that get built when rules become more important than relationships, when law has superseded love. Behind every broken rule, [she has] found a wounded soul. I have confronted my own brokenness which led me to take refuge in rules. My relationship with rule breakers has freed me to know God’s love over my dependences on laws. Laws form judgment; love forms relationships.”

This passage comes at the end of a series of characteristically Matthean challenges of the religious authorities to Jesus, on day after Jesus’ triumphal Palm Sunday entry into Jerusalem. Our translation states that the Pharisees asked the question to “test” Jesus. This word translated as “test” actually has a connotation of a hostile, combative approach.² The sole intent of the questioning is to trap Jesus into incriminating himself. His reply that the first and greatest commandment is “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, ...soul, and...mind,” comes from the *Shema*, the prayer out of Deuteronomy which begins every synagogue worship service and would have been repeated 5 times daily by Jesus’ pious contemporaries. The *Shema*, which means “hear,” so named for the beginning of the prayer which is, “Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Recite them to your children and talk about them when you are

¹ Juanita Campbell Rasmus, “Focus on Formation,” *Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions 2011* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), 307.

² Patrick Gray, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4. ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 213.

at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”³ Jesus’ answer to the question, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?”—the *Shema*—is flawless.

But Jesus’ answer does not stop there. He adds from Leviticus, “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” The Greek here, commonly translated, “and a second is like it” might be more accurately translated “a second, just as great as this one”⁴. In seminary, I distinctly remember learning that the idea in this passage is that to love God with your entire being and to love your neighbor as yourself are of *equal* importance. However, it seems most commentators are quick to point out that they are not actually equal—the commentators, like probably most of us, seem reluctant to put love of anyone on equal footing with God. The two are not equal, but *close*. So whether Jesus meant that they are the same or distinct, that they are equal or that love of God is still greater than love of neighbor, one thing is for certain: at the very least, “There is an inseparability between the two commandments, to love God with the whole self and to love the neighbor.... But while the two great commandments are inseparable, neither is dissolved into the other.”⁵

Scholar Douglas Hare clarifies the nature of this love, “In an age when the word ‘love’ is greatly abused, it is important that the primary component of biblical love is not affection but commitment. Warm feelings of gratitude may fill our consciousness as we consider all that God has done for us, but it is not warm feelings that [the *Shema*] demands of us but rather stubborn, unwavering commitment. Similarly, to love our neighbor, including our enemies, does not mean that we must feel affection for them. To love the neighbor is to imitate God by taking their needs seriously.”⁶

Jesus concludes, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” And “it seems that Jesus is asserting that love is a test of one’s true understanding of the law.”⁷ All other laws and commandments can be traced to these two, equal commandments. Imagine a mobile. The top arm is “You shall love the Lord your God with your entire being.” Just under that arm, forming a cross, is another arm stating, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” Dangling down from the arms are, the Pentateuch, the Prophets, all the individual laws, teachings of Jesus, Epistles, creeds. All hanging in balance, dancing beautifully in the breeze.

Is it easier to love God with your entire being, mind, body and soul, and to love your neighbor as yourself or is it easier to follow a complex set of laws governing every aspect of your life? At first, the more vague love of God and neighbor might seem easier, but when you really think about it, it’s pretty difficult. It’s really hard to really love God with our entire being one hundred percent of the time. It can be quite challenging to have that “stubborn, unwavering commitment” to God. And loving our neighbor as ourselves,

³ Deuteronomy 6: 4-9

⁴ Bauer Lexicon

⁵ Ed. Walter Brueggemann, et al, *Texts for Preaching: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV—Year A* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995), 541-2.

⁶ Hare, Douglas R. A. *Matthew*. (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1993.), 260.

⁷ Patrick Gray, *Feasting on the Word*, Year A, Volume 4. ed. David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011), 215.

for most of us, is infinitely more difficult. It's hard to love even our loved ones all the time, never mind people we don't know or perhaps don't particularly like.

It's like the song from *My Fair Lady*: the love-struck Freddy tries to woo Eliza singing, "Speak and the world is full of singing,/And I'm winging Higher than the birds./Touch and my heart begins to crumble./The heaven's tumble, Darling, and I'm..." and Eliza interrupts, "Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words!/I get words all day through;/First from him, now from you! Is that all you blighters can do?/Don't talk of stars Burning above; If you're in love,/Show me! Tell me no dreams/Filled with desire. If you're on fire,/Show me!" I think maybe that's how God feels sometimes. Don't just talk about loving me, show me. And one way to show me, is to treat the people I love like you love them, too. And that's the idea of the law.

Here's the thing about the law: the law is a gift from God, given to the Chosen People. The law, given by God and/or devised by people, was meant to help us know how to love God with our entire being and our neighbor as ourselves. Because, in many ways, it's easier to follow a specific, strict set of laws than it is to have a non-specific love of God and neighbor. The laws are all meant to be ways of showing, ways of enacting our love of God and neighbor.

But somewhere along the line, the religious authorities, got it mixed up and forgot that the higher purpose of the law and focused on the law itself. And that was part of Jesus' point. And of course, this is a mistake made not only by the religious authorities of Jesus' time but has been made throughout the ages and still is today. How often do we hear of people favoring law and judgment over love and relationship in the name of religious purity?

Thinking back to our mobile with the arms of love God with all your mind, body and soul and love your neighbor as yourself and the laws, teachings and creeds hanging down: what should happen if one of the pieces were to be removed? What if, one were to place all emphasis on one arm, such as attempting to love God and while neglecting to love one's neighbor? If the "love your neighbor" piece is removed from the mobile, all you have is a jumble of wire and string.

Jesus is critical of religious authorities for focusing on the law to the exclusion of caring for others. What does that look like in for modern Christians? In some churches, perhaps a homeless person would be sent away empty handed if she showed up at the church just before the worship service started. Our government spends countless dollars trying cases regarding whether or not the Ten Commandments can be displayed in court rooms. Convicted murderers are executed—many of whom may even be innocent—because killing is wrong.

Or what if people focused too heavily on loving their neighbor? Sometimes priorities get warped. Some people stop at nothing to protect certain neighbors even if it means harming others. Some extremists for environmental or animal rights causes harm people in their efforts to make their points. Some Pro-life extremists murder doctors who perform abortions.

These are extreme examples of a simple fact: attempting to truly love God, we can neglect our neighbor. Attempting to take care of our neighbor, we can neglect God. But to truly love God is to truly love *all* of our neighbors and to truly love all our neighbors *is* to truly love God. Simply put by Christian activist Dorothy Day, "We cannot love God unless we love each other."

It has been written that the two scripture passages Jesus quotes here—to love God with all our mind, body and soul from Deuteronomy and to love our neighbor as ourselves from Leviticus—“together provide a summary of Jesus’ mission and ministry. They are alike in the sense that they interpret one another.... In quoting the Shema, Jesus points out that the aim of the law is to orient one’s entire life toward God. However, one cannot love God without loving what God loves!” Beyond that, I would say that these two commandments together form not only a summary of Jesus’ mission and ministry, but indeed a summary of the Bible as a whole.

So what would it look like if we truly loved God with our entire being and our neighbor as ourselves? What would it look like if we truly had love of God and neighbor in balance? If love of God is defined as “stubborn, unwavering commitment” and love of neighbor is “to imitate God by taking their needs seriously,”⁸ Mother Theresa is exemplary of balanced and inseparable love of both God and neighbor. We can’t all be Mother Theresa. But can support mission both locally and globally. We can serve or donate food for Fish and Community House, we can support the mission of this church and denomination financially, we can show our love of neighbor in countless ways. We can seek to remember that we cannot love God without loving what God loves. We can’t all be Mother Theresa, but we can strive for concentrated equilibrium between love of God with our entire being and elevating all our neighbors’ needs equal to our own. In doing so, we come that much closer to the kingdom of heaven.

⁸ Hare, Douglas R. A. *Matthew*. John Knox Press, Louisville. 1993. p. 260.