

“The Sum of the Law and the Prophets”
Psalm 90:13-17; 1 Thess 2:1-8;
Matthew 22:34-36

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In the passages from Matthew that we have been looking at these past several weeks, the Pharisees come and are trying to trip up Jesus. This time they are trying to get him to summarize the Law, assuming that perhaps he will summarize just part of the law in some way that allows them to point out how he is wrong.

Jesus, however, responds with something that does do that summary. But I’m going to point out something before we get to exactly what he said. They come asking about a summary for the Law, and he gives them something that not only summarizes the Law, but also the Prophets. All the Law and the Prophets hang on this summary. I think what he’s beginning to suggest is that we can spend a whole lot of time on the letter of the law, but if you don’t have the spirit of the law like the prophets did, the understanding of what the law was meant to do and how it reflects God’s will. This means you won’t truly understand the will of God.

His answer is one that, if you have ever heard me preach before, I bring up fairly often because it’s central. It’s his answer to the question of what are the greatest commandments. What summarizes the Law and the Prophets? He takes it from Deuteronomy 6:5: Love the Lord your God with your heart, your soul, and your mind. And then, from Leviticus 19:18: Love your neighbor as yourself.

As we begin to try to understand what Jesus is saying, we have the Hebrew scriptures as precursor, so we might look back to the Hebrew word for “love.” I can’t pronounce it, but I did look at what it means. It is a word that suggests that because of one’s focus and concentration one acts. It is more about the consequences of paying attention. It’s the action that occurs.

Then, if we look at how it’s been translated into Greek, some of you may know there are different words for love in Greek. Our English word for love tends to encompass all of these. Our word for love is so broad that we really have to look at the context to understand what it means. The Greek language broke that out a little bit. There are three particularly important words for love in Greek. The first is eros, the second is philia, and the third is agape. The interesting thing is that agape was used so little, particularly in the form that it is used in the New Testament, that at one point people thought the New Testament made that word up. That’s probably not the case, but its use of that word was distinct. So, let me briefly describe the three Greek words for love.

Eros is the idea of the attraction love, the sexual love, the romance love. If you think about eros, it’s almost something that happens to you. You fall in love. You are drawn into that relationship in that way. It’s almost a love that you have to choose *not* to follow.

Philia, on the other hand, is a friendship kind of love. It is about the work of being friends. Being a friend tends to happen with those you click with. It begins with getting along well, and then you can work at it and make it into a friendship that is wonderful. There is a sense of loyalty in it. There may be a sense of the idea of networking in it as well.

So the first one, eros, happens to you. The second one, philia, you have to work at, and it fits. The third one, agape, you have to choose to do. It's about choice and will. You choose to value another because you know they are a child of God and therefore you want to seek their good, to care for them, to do what is good for them. It's a matter of will and action.

If we were reading Luke, Jesus would go right into describing this in terms of a good Samaritan, where he takes the restrictions off of love completely. It's not just about one's compatriots, not just about one's tribe, but it's about the neighbor along the path that needs our help. It is about the love that looks to see how we care for those around us. Jesus goes so far as to suggest that we should even love our enemies.

Now, if we were to take the whole of the New Testament, particularly the Gospels where Jesus is doing a lot of teaching, we would find some forces that seem to counteract love. What are some of those forces? Well, I will use some old-fashioned words because they have the breadth to encapsulate a good portion of Jesus' meaning.

One of those words is mammon. I think at some point, it says love of mammon is the beginning of all evil. It is a force that counteracts Jesus' love. Here is a definition of mammon: it means money, material wealth, or any entity that promises wealth and is associated with the greedy pursuit of gain. The idea is that we let something else get in front of God. Jesus is talking about loving God with heart, mind, soul, all of who we are, but we let something else get in front of that. What's easy to let get in front of that? Well, one of those things is mammon, because it gives us power and security, and we forget to let God give us those things. God is the real author of power and security. So one of the forces or the ways of going off the path is to go after mammon and neglect our love of God.

A second of those is another old word that I don't really use much, but is kind of descriptive. It's called vainglory. This idea is based on the human desire to be seen, appreciated, acknowledged, accepted, resulting in a thirst for honors, rewards, status, and other forms of acknowledgement from other people. This is the idea of looking sideways to see how other people are thinking of me. Am I as good? Who is better? It is comparing ourselves to others, the desire to look good in other people's eyes, and making that the most important thing. It is looking sideways instead of looking upward to God, letting the love of God for us and the love we return be what shapes who we are, not vainglory.

The final one that I want to note is the stress of persecution or the fear of loss. The things that assault and afflict us. The insults and the sufferings of our lives. Jesus

knew his disciples were going to encounter those. He knew that was going to be a struggle, and yet, he invites us to hold onto the love of God and love of neighbor in the midst of that suffering and struggle. Indeed, it seems that faith acquires living force to the extent that it is active in love. The book of James, I think, is all about that idea.

So as we think about how Jesus makes the love of God and the love of neighbor central, and then we realize that there are struggles that we have with it, we note that what he's really trying to focus us on is the love of God. With our whole being, we are to realize God's love for us that we might choose, then, to care about how important God is and what God wants, God's will for us. That pulls us into the realm of God. That directs us to live in the kingdom of God and to make God's concerns our first concerns. That centers in the love of God and love of neighbor.

It doesn't completely pull us out of the social realm, however, because we are invited to love our neighbor as ourselves. To do that, we remain in the social realm. We try to understand how we might see and care for those around us. In fact, what Jesus is doing is showing us how to evaluate the way to live. How to evaluate a perspective on a problem or a proposed solution. How does this way, perspective, or action allow me to value and care for others? We can use that idea. Does this way, perspective, or action enable me to care for others? Does it enable all of God's children to know the fullness of life, nor not?

There are a few big ways we might think about that. First, the history of white supremacy in our nation doesn't allow us to value and care for a group of people as truly God's children, but denigrates, devalues, debases people, simply based on skin color and social history. That goes contrary to what Jesus is asking of us—to love our neighbor. When we are doing something that doesn't enable that, it doesn't bring the good for all our neighbors to bear.

We could look at the way the flow of goods and services works, whether those benefits go just to the haves, and how the have-nots receive. Not caring about the have-nots, it seems, is to devalue some of God's children, favoring a few, particularly the wealthy and the powerful. Or we could look at individual rights in a way that allows an accumulation of power in individuals and refuses to acknowledge our responsibilities to cooperate and collaborate for the good of all. It seems contrary to the love God calls us to in Jesus.

We can look at big things with that perspective, but we can also look at our own lives and the daily work we do, the way we interact with people. The Moscow Interfaith Association is trying to think about how we can live out this call to love God and to love our neighbor, recognizing that in this time there is a lot of struggle. There is a lot of division. There seems to be so much enmity. One of the things we thought about is could we simply do something that is counteractive to that enmity? What about just taking 10 days, starting on November 1st and going through November 10th, and adding one act of kindness that we wouldn't have normally done to each of those days. Is there some way that I can bring kindness into someone's life? I can pay it forward. I

can call someone I need to call. And if you really want to take the challenge another step, just think about how I can be kind to somebody I really don't feel like being kind to. Because Jesus invites us to love not only those who are loveable, but even our enemies.

So, Jesus' invitation, giving us this core of love of God and love of neighbor, enables us to begin to think about what we do and to evaluate whether it fits with what Jesus is calling us to do.

Now it feels like that's the main message, but there is this one addendum at the end where Jesus asks the Pharisees about who the Messiah is. I think the importance of that is as we try, as we think about how we might live out this love of God and love of neighbor, the question suggests that we may not recognize exactly how God is at work. The Pharisees didn't understand how God could make that happen. We look back and see Jesus as both divine and human, as being both the son of David and the Son of God. But in the moment, the Pharisees couldn't understand it. I wonder how many times in the moment I don't quite understand what God is doing, but I know God is with us. God is at work. God continues to send God's Spirit to work with us and engage us in that work.

As we go forward from here today, let us remember that it is more than the letter of the law, but the spirit of the law. That's the reason Jesus includes the prophets, because love is a matter of will and action to do God's will. Love is central. Our faith acquires living force to the extent it is active in love towards God and neighbor. It is choosing to express the value of the other through caring for that other, through wanting to make sure they experience the good, the fullness of life that God wants for all of us.

Finally, God is active with us. We are not alone. Even when we don't understand how God is at work, God is with us and working, engaging. They didn't understand how God was at work when Jesus was right before them. God is at work engaging us in expressing God's will for our world. Amen.