

Love 101: What the Gospel Says About Love

Mark 12: 28-34

One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.’ The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.”³⁴ When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

If you happened to be driving around town a day or two after Hurricane Michael, you may have encountered the chaos of what happens when the traffic lights aren’t working. At the busy intersections some cars yield, others gas right on through. In the mass confusion of people not knowing what to do, some eventually get frustrated and press the accelerator to the floor. Others sit with white knuckles clinched around the steering wheel, too afraid to move because it is dangerous. If you’ve been on the scene you recognize why we need laws. A world without laws is chaotic. A church without some system of governance to lean on can be chaotic too. In Jesus’ time, of course laws were a big deal. So a scribe approaches Jesus and asks him which law out of the 613 available laws in his opinion is the most important.

Begin by noting that the question is subjective. The answer about which law is the most important depends on who we are asking. If we were to ask someone who works for the media they would probably respond, “Freedom of speech.” If we were to ask the NRA they would say, “The right to bear arms.” If we were to ask an undocumented immigrant who was nine months pregnant what the most important law is for her, she might say, “Birthright citizenship.” The answer to the question depends on who we are asking.

Ask the church the question and we have always echoed Jesus’ response: love. We might not always get it right, but we would say we are about loving God and loving our neighbor.

Love. *Agape*. Unconditional love. Love is the most powerful force in the world. Love has the unique ability to bring people together who seem to live in worlds apart. What does a group of five to eight-year-old children have in common with a group of fifty to eighty-year-old children? Not much, but if you heard them sing together last week it was the holiest of sounds. Why? Because something inside of us knew: love sounds like that. Love has the power to open us up

beyond our wildest imaginations. Just listen to some of the old stories around us of parents who heard their children say the words, “I’m gay.” And despite what the world, or the law, or even the church told them, these parents knew there was a force stronger in the world which would not allow them to say anything other than, “I love you.” Love can build bridges over generational gaps. Love can knock over walls of discrimination. Love can even poke holes in our theology. You know, a lot of the gospel is about Jesus breaking laws in the name of love. He heals on the Sabbath. He doesn’t mind when a menstruating woman touches his clothes. He touches lepers. He eats with deplorables. Only Love has the power to defy laws. It is what God does when God defies the law of nature by raising a dead man after three days. Love: It is bigger than any law. It’s greater than any tradition. It’s the most powerful force in the world.

Except, God have mercy, we forget. We forget those two little, impossible to manage commands: Love God; love neighbor. Somehow in the throes of life, love can get lost. There was a seminary professor who was cleaning her house and began cleaning out her hope chest. In it were an assortment of memories: her old high school yearbooks, her diplomas, some clothes she hoped to fit into again someday. A hope chest full of life’s relics. But buried at the bottom of the hope chest were a stack of letters with a string tied around them. She opened them up and discovered they were the love letters she had saved: some were written to her from her honey. Some were little notes of love she collected from when her children were young. Some were her private letters to God. Buried at the bottom was love. Have you ever noticed that when life gets pinched, prayer time falls to the bottom of the priority list? And when it seems we need to be in God’s presence the most—when the anxiety is high, and we are overwhelmed—we neglect our time with God? Or maybe we get so consumed by our own lives it is all-to-easy to forget about our responsibilities to love our neighbors. You know, I keep hearing about how small of a city Winston Salem is. After all, it does have a small town feel to it. But then we forget that in a city of 250,000 people, 90,000 live on the east side. It’s not that the city is really all that small, it is just we forget because everything we do is contained to the west side and we forget about loving our neighbors, too.

But maybe there is a bigger problem? Perhaps the bigger problem is that we forget what love looks like according to the gospel. For the gospel writers, Love is not a sentimental feeling as much as it is a sacrificial action. You see, when Jesus is answering the question about which law is the greatest, he is standing in Jerusalem at the temple. And we all know what is about to happen next. He will be captured in a garden while he prays, he will be put on two trials by religious factions and political powers, and then he will be hung on a cross. So inside of these two commands of loving God and loving neighbor, the gospel is showing us the two directions that gospel love flows. You see, the ultimate good news is that no matter who you are or where you are on your journey, God is a loving parent who looks upon us with unconditional love. But if we stop there, we miss the penultimate good news and the second direction of the gospel’s love. The second direction of the gospel says that while we are loved unconditionally by God, we are also required to spread out God’s *agape* love horizontally toward the rest of God’s creation. There is a vertical direction in which the gospel’s love flows between us and God, and

there is a horizontal direction of the good news which flows between us and our neighbor. Put the two together and we get the intersectional picture of what Love ultimately looks like: Jesus on the cross. Gospel Love is not sentimental; it is sacrificial.

Perhaps you've heard that there are a couple of different groups who are meeting the caravan of migrants at the border. One group is a militia carrying hunting rifles and enough ammo to start a blood bath. But the other group is setting up a table with bread and wine to serve anyone who is willing to gather at the communion table. According to the gospel, they are not far from the Kingdom of God. Or perhaps you've heard about the groups of Muslims throughout the world who have stood hand-in-hand around their neighborhood Jewish synagogues forming a circle of peace. Hundreds and thousands of Muslims standing to form a human shield around their Jewish neighbors as they worship and grieve. Now tell me: are they not far from the kingdom of God!

You know, we could say our prayers religiously. We could stand and recite our creeds every week. We could put blank checks into the offering plate. But without love... We could preach prophetic sermons. We could tire ourselves serving others. We could have the faith to move mountains. But without love...

We could create programs for children, we could recruit new people for our committees, we could even be the most organized church in Winston-Salem.

But if we do not have love, we are, as St. Paul says, only going through the motions. What is most important to the church has always been Love.

I know Trinity is a church where we remember that Love is the most powerful force in the world. Where we love God and neighbor. And when we come together to share God's two-directional love, be assured, there is no law that can stop us; and tell me: are we not far from the kingdom of God?