

The First Way of Love

August 19, 2018

It seems to me everybody gets intrigued by lists. I was listening to a sports station the other day, and just for some variety, they were asking listeners to call in what they thought were the three best American war movies. When I get into conversation with somebody who likes to read, sometimes I'll ask, What are your top five novels? And then we'll compare notes. By the way, do you know the top five Bible stories? According to an internet site called Top Ten, here they are: The Crucifixion of Jesus, the Creation of the heavens and the earth, David v. Goliath, the Resurrection of Jesus, and Noah and the Ark. Jonah and the whale came in 8th. If you're like me, you might wonder why the Resurrection didn't beat out David and Goliath, but there you go. Everybody gets his or her own choice.

A man comes to Jesus and says, OK, Rabbi, Moses gave us a list of 613 commandments. What's the top one? What's the most important? If I only did one, what should it be? We just finished our series on the Ten Commandments, (that's a pretty good list of guidelines, isn't it?) and for these last two Sundays of the summer, I want to focus on the Two Great Commandments that Jesus gives us. He actually repeats what the Law of Moses says. The man who comes to Jesus is a Pharisee, one of the very religious people who kept the law. And the question was meant to trap Jesus into saying something that would get him in trouble.

So the man asks, What's the greatest commandment? And Jesus answers, Here's my top one- "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This was really nothing new for the Pharisee to hear. This is in the Hebrew Scriptures, in Deuteronomy 6:4. We heard it earlier this morning. What Jesus does that is new is he adds the law about loving your neighbor as a second very important 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."

That second commandment we will discuss next week. That is the second way of love, loving your neighbor. But today I want us to think about what it means to love our God with all of our heart, and soul, and mind, the First Way of Love.

Notice that Jesus doesn't say, Love *God* with all your heart, soul and mind. He doesn't say, Love some ethereal God you don't know much about. Love some Divine Other who is totally mysterious. No, he says, Love *your* God. Remember Jesus is Jewish and he is talking with a Jew. Love *your* God....Love *this* God who has an address, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Love the God who took our fathers and mothers out of slavery in Egypt. Love the God who brought us home from Babylon. Love the God who carries you like a nursing mother carries her newborn. Love the God who makes you walk in green pastures, and restores your soul. Love THAT God. Love the God who has loved YOU! And we followers of Jesus can hear the words: Love the God who came in the life and death and resurrected One. Love THAT God. Love the God who has already loved US.

And how much should be love God? The command isn't just to love God a little bit, or even a lot, it's to love our God with *everything we have*: our heart, our soul, and our mind. Did you notice that Jesus in Matthew changes a word from the Old Testament text? Deuteronomy says, Love your God with your heart, soul and *might*, might being your physical self. Jesus in Matthew says, Love your God with your heart, soul and *mind*.

In Matthew's Gospel Jesus is the Great Teacher, the New Moses, and maybe Matthew is saying, to follow Jesus, we need to love God with our mind as well. When Jesus says this in Mark and Luke's gospels, he says, Love God with all four elements: your heart, your soul, your strength, and your mind.

What does it mean to love God like that? Let's take these one at a time. The heart in English means the center of our emotions. In Hebrew it means more than that. It's the center of our will as well. It's our decision-making center. The heart is where we make choices out of. In the liturgy leading into Holy Communion at the first service, I say, The Lord be with you. And you say, And also with you. And then I say, Lift up your hearts! And you say, We lift them to the Lord!

What does it mean to lift up our hearts? It's as if we are saying, We lift up our emotions and our will and our choices to you, God!

We love God with our emotions. Some of you were here for Woody's funeral on Wednesday. Woody suffered from memory loss these last years. And Ruth asked that we sing a hymn called, *When Memory Fades*. When I first heard that hymn, I

was at a workshop on our new hymnal, and my dad at the time was suffering from dementia. The workshop leader said, Turn to page 792, and let's sing this poignant song about God's presence as we and our loved one struggle with dementia. I cried all the way through the song.

Ruth requested that hymn in memory of Woody. Listen to the lyrics of the third verse: "Within your Spirit, goodness lives unfading. The past and future mingle into one. All joys remain, unshadowed light pervading. No valued deed will ever be undone. Your mind enfolds all finite acts and offerings. Held in your heart, our deathless life is one."

My dad couldn't remember who I was when I called him Sunday afternoons, but God is the one who held all of his memories, all of his life; no valued deed he did ever do will be undone. Same for Woody, whether he could remember it or not: no valued deed will ever be undone. And when I sing that hymn and remember my father, or when I remember Woody, and I get teary, that is worshiping God with my heart, with my emotions.

When you get passionate about injustice, that is a part of loving God with your emotions. I was at a workshop on congregational organizing yesterday, and the workshop presenter told the story of Joel, a man she worked with organizing in Spokane. Joel's father and grandfather had been farmers in the cut-flower business. They had been very successful. And Joel's dad was trying to pass this business down to Joel. But on his dad's watch, the business went bankrupt.

His dad was ashamed, and saw it as his own fault. He died about still thinking that. But Joel realized about ten years after his dad's death that NAFTA, the North American Free Trade Agreement, had put his dad out of business, because all of a sudden cheap cut-flowers began to flood across the border from down South. His dad couldn't compete.

A similar thing happened with corn grown in Mexico. NAFTA floods the Mexican corn market with subsidized American corn, and Mexican farmers can't compete, and their families are hungry, so they come north looking for work. And Joel, once he figured out what had happened to the family business, said, I need to be involved in something that moves upstream, I need to be involved in something

that that looks at the big picture. And now he his is in community organizing. He is loving God with his passion, his energy around his dad's story.

Trade policy is complicated, as we are again discovering, and I don't bring this up to tell you what we ought to do. But I bring it up because this man Joel became passionate about loving God with his heart. He is channeling the poignant and frustrating story of his father into working to create a more just world. I believe that is loving God with your heart.

And remember the heart also has to do with the will. So when we choose to love, when we choose to have mercy, when we choose to forgive, when we choose to reconcile, when we choose to build a bridge instead of a wall between us and somebody else, when we choose to repent, we are loving God with our will, we are loving God with our choices. That's loving God with our heart.

And Jesus says, Love your God with all your soul. The soul in Hebrew is really different than the soul in Greek. In the Hebrew, when God in Genesis 2 forms a human being out of the clay, and then breathes life into that form, the Hebrew text says, a living soul is created. In the Hebrew, there is no separate soul in us. We are a living body. The Greeks came up with the idea of a separate, immortal soul within us. So to love God with our soul means, in shorthand, with everything we've got, including our deepest selves, maybe we could say, our psychology.

We have some evolutionary traits that are deep within us. One is that we can react to threats very quickly. We have a limbic response system in the back of our brains that reacts to perceived threats, especially with creating fear. The problem is that most of us don't live in the jungle anymore, and we don't deal with threats as much, but if someone cuts us off in traffic, or throws an insult at us, that reaction deep within us can well up.

To love God with our soul, the deepest created parts of us, might mean to let God work on us, to turn over that response to God, to count to ten before we respond, to get into the frontal, decision-making part of our brain. Jesus says, Love God with all your soul, with the deepest created parts of yourself.

And love your God with all your strength. I went backpacking in the Russian Wilderness in Northern California back in July, and because I had the strength to

put a pack on and hike 30 miles, I had the chance to see views like this (mountain lake with sunset). On that trip, I felt like I was loving God with all my strength, with all my energy. Getting out the last day was difficult. It was a lot of uphill, and my knee was struggling, and it was probably 95 degrees, I was using all my strength. And when we got back to the trailhead, which was still at 6800 feet, a forest worker drove by just to see who might be up on the hill

He stopped right as we were putting our packs into the back of the truck, and said, You want a chilled bottle of water? Oh, my goodness, God's timing. I was almost out of water, and what was left was lukewarm. Ice-water never tasted so good. I felt like I was loving God with my body that day, with all of my strength. And that forest worker was telling us about the fires he had recently fought. In taking care of the forest, these firefighters love God with all their strength. They're taking care of this amazing creation that we need to take better care of.

Jesus says, Love your God with all your heart (which is your emotions, your will); love your God with all your soul (which is your deepest self, your psychology); love your God with all your strength (with your whole body) and love your God with all your *mind*. It's ok to wrestle with our thinking about God. It's ok to question things. It's ok to change your mind. God can handle it. And, more important, *we* grow in our understanding when we struggle. If you're bored some afternoon, go to my bio page on our website where I tell you how I have changed my mind theologically about some things. That's part of the way I love God: with my mind.

You love God with your mind when you learn new things; when you stretch yourself; when you get into deep conversation with your spouse or a friend; when you tackle a new challenge: you are loving God with your mind.

Now Jesus doesn't stop there. He says, A second commandment is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. Loving your neighbor is the other side of the coin. The two are inseparable. We'll talk about loving our neighbor next week as I finish this summer series.

Would you pray with me? God, you are not just some Divine Being we know nothing about. You are the God who brought the people out of slavery; you are the God in Jesus who healed the sick and dined with the outcast; you're the God who

raised Jesus from the dead. And you ask us to love you with everything we have: our emotions, our will, our deepest selves, our minds, and with whatever strength we have. We thank you that we love you because you first loved us. Help us to take a step this week in deepening our love for you. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.