

Sermon for Trinity

Proper 25, 2023

"When the Pharisees heard that [Jesus] had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first 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."

I first saw Lake Tahoe a little more than forty years ago. If you have not seen it, it's a worthy trip to a beautiful place, a high, blue mountain lake surrounded by snow capped peaks. And that's not all for if you can be out on the lake, you can see down towards the bottom of the lake, clear as can be, forty feet, seventy feet, sometimes even more deeply. The view invites you to consider how very deep the world might be, nearly unsearchable and filled with things that require contemplation, like love. I invite you to think about this morning's Gospel as if looking deep into the blue lake, discovering new depths in the search for human and divine love.

This Gospel offers a cardinal teaching of the church; no one, I dare say, passes through the church without learning this passage. Even though that's true, just reading about the greatest commandments does leave many unanswered questions, questions that probe deeper and deeper. I was reminded of this Gospel while reading an essay by a fellow Episcopalian who wondered aloud, "Why do we worship?" She was bold enough to ask the hard questions such as, "Does God need worship? Is God a divine narcissist?" And more. She answered herself, "Of course not." If God is everything, greater than the creation heaven and earth itself, plainly God doesn't need worship. What does God wish from worship? That we walk humbly with Jesus.

I think we can ask the same question about why we should love God. These words are so easy to say, aren't they, words like worship, prayer and of course, love. Have you ever told someone you loved them? I'm old for this, I know, but I can vividly remember the first time I told Kathy I loved her. Our whole relationship changed in a moment, and I would come to learn more about love than I thought possible in the coming decade. The first love I expressed for her grew into something much richer, more and more complex. What does it mean to love someone? Grab a cup of coffee, pull up a chair and give me your afternoon.

Knowing that, what then does it mean to say that we love God with all our heart and mind and soul? Let me assure you that's a question that's at least five

thousand years old. The ancient Jews who answered God's call for love came to realize that how we love God was not an easy question to answer. In fact, the ancient scholars found it even more challenging to grasp in practice. We have a written record that for hundreds of years leading up to this Gospel this morning that the faithful had wrestled with that question week after week, month after month, year after year.

That's important to know because it's background to the debate between Jesus and the Pharisees. Just earlier than this morning's Gospel, Jesus has prevailed over the Sadducees, and now Jesus has been called to debate a Pharisee. What did the Pharisees hope to achieve? Public debates then worked much as they do now among modern politicians; people contested back and forth, back and forth until one person prevails with an answer, an answer that produces a heartfelt "yes" in the listeners. We don't have to explain it, we just know that one answer is better than others.

The Pharisees hope to catch Jesus unaware with the simplest of questions—what is the greatest commandment? The answer Jesus makes could have been given by nearly any child in Israel; almost every child from a young age had been taught to say it, "Love God with all your heart and soul." That's number one. And then Jesus adds "Love your neighbor as you love yourself." The Pharisee, who's been party to hundreds of debates about the greatest commandment, melts away. In fact, the next time the Pharisees and Sadducees will confront Jesus he will be on the cross. Whatever else might be said—and what more could really be said?—Jesus has grasped the entirety of our existence. We are called to love, to love God and to love our neighbors. Nothing else is as important. And please remember, the expression of love changes you forever.

So, what is this love? Why does God call for it? You likely know that there is more than one word for love in the Biblical languages, unlike our English that somehow gets by with the single word—love. Love in its finest forms, we know from the Bible and experience, is about others. And if you have loved, and I know you have, then you know that love forms a bond that shapes the one who loves the other. I know that I have become a different person through love; I think differently, react differently, even care differently because the one I love does too. Love has changed my mind, my heart, and my soul. Think about that then in terms of loving God—if you love God with your entire being, then your entire being will be, in time, shaped to the form of God.

Does that seem humanly impossible? That's why Christ came among us, so that the fully human and at the same time, fully divine person, can show us how the love of God can take shape and form us. Make no mistake, this is not easy stuff,

done in a moment. As you well know, your love can and will cost you. There are those who will and want to take advantage of that love. There are those who will not love as Christ loved, when they choose to love themselves more than others. But this we know with absolute certainty, the Christ who loved us completely from the cross does in the end, prevail. As our Presiding Bishop likes to say with heartfelt joy, in the end, Love Wins. Amen.