

### Matthew 22:34-46 (NRSV)

When the Pharisees heard that he 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."

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: "What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David." He said to them, "How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, 'The Lord said to my Lord, 'Sit at my right hand,

until I put your enemies under your feet" '?

If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?" No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.

Grace to you and peace, from God our Father and from our Lord Jesus Christ.

What is love? Is love an emotion? Or is it a behavior? Is it a choice, a decision? Or is it totally beyond our control?

I confess I grapple with this, oftener than I would like. In one form or another, I think a lot of us do. On one hand, I find it hard to have feelings of love for everyone, even though I know that I am to love my neighbor and I know, too, that everyone is my neighbor in one way or another. So I beat myself up for not being able to have feelings of love or even affection for everyone. Sometimes even tolerance is a stretch.

But on the other hand, I think that loving others without feeling any affection for them is a pretty mean-spirited way to live. People will say, for example, that love really doesn't have anything to do with emotion – that love is working for the good of others, whether you like them or not. That love is a choice to seek the good of others, no matter how you feel about them.

Now, at different times in my life I've been satisfied with this formulation. I've had it preached to me by thoughtful people. But as I walked with this Gospel reading, the idea that love is only behavior, a choice that has nothing to do with feelings just didn't work for me. Here's why.

Jesus is in a continuing argument with the Pharisees. They send in an expert on the Law, not so much a lawyer the way we think of them today, but rather a religious expert. He asks Jesus what the greatest commandment is. Jesus comes right back – with *two* great commandments. First, “‘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.’”

Do you see the problem? It isn't hard to translate “Love your neighbor as yourself” to mean “Choose to work for the good of the neighbor, whether you like him or not.” But it seems strange to say, “Choose to work for the good of God, whether you like him or not.” Strange for two reasons -- first, how do we work for the good of God? Second, how can we not like God?

So, where do we go from here? One way is to say that love of God is very different from love of neighbor. And I suppose that might be true, but didn't Jesus say that the second great commandment was *like* the first? But there is another problem, if we are honest. Sometimes we don't really love God with all our hearts, souls and minds.

I know that's a shocking thing to say, but I know for me it's sometimes true. There are times when I am angry with God, times when things happen that I don't approve of, things that I don't think God should allow. There are even Bible stories where God or Jesus does something that I don't understand or approve of, times when Jesus is angry with the disciples who are probably doing the best they can and I wish he'd cut them some slack, sometimes I wish he'd cut *me* some slack, but he doesn't, he's just angry and impatient and disapproving, and he makes that disappointed face that just makes me crazy, and I want to say, well, why don't *you* try this for a while ... whew, you see where this is going, don't you?

If you love God all the time, maybe you really are a saint. But maybe you are worshiping a God that you made up rather than the God we really have. Because the God we really have isn't aiming to make us happy all the time. He's aiming to get under our skins sometimes, to remind us of the ways that we fall short and the ways that we could do better. The God we really have does, I think, get a little angry with us sometimes, maybe not "turn-you-into-a-pillar-of-salt" angry, but angry nonetheless. And the God we really have is hard to love *all* the time.

Now, if you *never* love God, that's a problem, too. Because God isn't simply the judge, the angry parent, the dysfunctional partner, the distant creator. God does love us, God is love, God is with us in everything that we do, God hopes for us, cares for us, gives us this glorious creation and each other and gives us the space and the freedom to make choices about how we relate both to creation and to each other.

And maybe that's the way that the second commandment is like the first. We recognize that we don't always love God and we don't always love our neighbor in an authentic, emotional way, and we recognize, too, that this is a problem, a tension, and probably one that we are going to have to live with, at least on this side of the Great Feast.

And maybe that's the answer to my question. What is Love? Love is emotion, *and* love is also behavior. At a minimum, love of the neighbor is seeking the good of the neighbor, and love of God is trying to live as God intends for us to live. Our lives are better if our emotions can come into line with our behaviors. Our lives are better when we can truly cherish our neighbors, rejoice in them, care for them emotionally as we do physically. Our lives are better when we can love God, when we can offer worship and praise with our whole heart and soul and mind.

But in the meantime, we are responsible for our behavior, both toward our neighbors and toward God. Our neighbors, we are called to feed and to support and to save from harm, to bind their wounds and see to their healing, to see that they are housed and clothed and cared for. Our God, we are called to worship and praise and we are called to make use of the means of grace and to support the work of the church and the church's seminaries and ministries. These are all behaviors we are called to do.

And when we do these things, when we behave lovingly toward our neighbor and our God, sometimes something wonderful happens. Not always, but sometimes we come to feel love for the people we are commanded to behave lovingly towards. Sometimes, we come to feel love for our God whom we are called to worship and praise. Sometimes, when our hearts are closed or wounded or tired we can't feel the love that we wish we could and we know we should. Sometimes, we are angry or out of sorts and then we behave lovingly not as an emotion but as an obligation.

Sometimes duty meets grace, sometimes heart meets mind, and we are free to love as we should. These are blessed moments. But in the meantime we are responsible for what we do, and we live with the tension between love as behavior and love as emotion, between affection and obligation.

Today we celebrate the Reformation and if the Reformation is about anything it is about living with tension and ambiguity. The church is reformed and is always reforming. Luther, our namesake was a great theologian and crusader, and was also a thoroughly wicked and profane man of his time. We are both sinners and saints, both flawed and redeemed and we travel the road between already and not yet. And we love not always as we should but only as we are able.

Amen.