

Matthew 22:34-46
10/29/17—Pentecost 21A

Psalms 90:1-2, 4, 12, 14, 17
I Thessalonians 2:1-8

Living Love

Are you like your parents? Now I'm not asking whether you *look* like them. What I mean is, what impact has being your father's and mother's son or daughter had on who you are?

For instance: Are you a sports fan like your dad? Do you have his skill at woodworking? Did you inherit his gentle spirit?

Do you have your mom's sense of humor? Her eye for the beauty and diversity of the good creation? Her artistic gifts?

How much of your parents is revealed in you? I think most of us believe that we possess some of our parents' qualities and values.

In biblical times—more so than is the case today—people thought that a person's nature, character, and personality traits come directly from one's parents. Remember when Jesus addresses Peter as *Simon, son of John*? Being his father's son is such a fundamental aspect of Simon Peter's identity that it's part of his name. He is who he is largely because of who his parent is.

According to the Hebrew Scriptures, which we know as the Old Testament, the Messiah would come from the house and

lineage of David. Now David was a political figure. A military hero. A warrior king. The Messiah was expected to be all these things, in the view of religious leaders.

In today's account from Matthew's Gospel, during the final week of Jesus' ministry, a number of Pharisees have gathered in the temple. Challenging Jesus. Hoping to trap him into saying something for which they can have him arrested. Questioning him.

But Jesus asks these Pharisees some questions of his own. Beginning with: *What do you think of the Messiah?* He knows they don't believe that the One standing right in front of them is the Messiah himself. So Jesus asks another question: *Whose son is the Messiah?*

By now, these temple authorities are exchanging glances and probably rolling their eyes. As if to say, what a stupid question! *Everybody* knows whose son the Messiah is. He's *David's* son.

As readers of Matthew's Gospel, we learned right up front about Jesus' family tree. You remember his genealogy that states so-and-so was the father of so-and-so, all the way back to King David and before him. So when the Pharisees reply that the Messiah is David's son, David's descendent, they're right—up to a point—in answering Jesus' question.

And today when you and I hear Jesus asking this question, we know that the way *we* answer makes all the difference.

Because the Messiah—the Christ—isn't *just* somebody's grandson and great-grandson and great-great-grandson. The Messiah—the Christ—is so much more. Not only son of David, but Son of God.

We know who he is. And we know with whom he is in relationship—with the One he calls Father. But theirs is a unique relationship. For your parents are to *some* extent revealed in you. But God is *perfectly* revealed in Jesus. The Christ. The Son of the Father's love.

My sisters and brothers, God is love. God's essence is love. At the very center of God is love, from which all else flows. Once you and I "get" that, we can begin—just begin—to fathom the love with which God loves. And the kind of love that God desires from us.

The Bible is the story of God's loving activity with God's people. This God is all about relationship. This God yearns to be loved in return.

So it's early in the scriptural narrative—in Deuteronomy—that God speaks through Moses: *Hear O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all*

your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might. This commandment is known as the Shema, the Hebrew word for *hear* or *listen*, and it's recited each morning and each evening by every faithful Jew.

This first commandment doesn't originate with Jesus, and neither does the second, found in Leviticus: *You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

The thing is, it's not possible to truly love God and not love the neighbor. First John reminds us that *those who don't love a brother or sister whom they've seen can't love God whom they have not seen.* Loving God is inextricably intertwined with loving God's children.

So when the Pharisees put their sharpest legal expert up against Jesus to trap him with the greatest commandment question, he cites these two that just can't be separated: *Love God with all you've got, and love your neighbor as much as you love yourself.* Jesus likens these love commandments to two sturdy pegs fastened securely to a wall. On them hang every law of Moses and every word of the prophets. Every statute, every precept, every biblical teaching is rooted in loving God or grounded in loving the neighbor.

Both of these commands to love have lifelong familiarity to Jesus' adversaries who stand opposing him in the temple. You and I know these commands, too. Many of us first heard them as kids in Sunday school. They sound so simple. But they're not easy to obey.

Maybe part of the reason we struggle with them has to do with our ideas about love. In our culture, the word *love* is so overused that its meaning has gotten kind of fuzzy. We might say that we love pizza. Or that we love a new car. Or that we love this beautiful season of the year.

And then there's the set of legends and myths about love that we've bought into, that pervade the air we breathe. You know, all the stuff that songs and movies suggest about love. Things like this: Love is a feeling, an emotion. Love is based on something outside yourself. And beyond your control. Love is something you *fall* in. Love overpowers you and you can't help yourself. Love is passive; it's something that happens *to* you, not something you *do*. The world has all these notions about love.

But it probably won't surprise you to hear that these notions differ from the love of God in Christ Jesus and the love you and I

are called to offer in return. Let's spend a few minutes considering this love.

Love for God and the neighbor is a response to the grace of God who first loved you. You *choose* whether or not to respond to that grace-filled love. Love is a choice you make—the intentionality of loving with your whole being, of loving with all your might and not holding anything back. This God, who made you and gave you all that you are, longs for all of you. *All* your love—heart and soul. And mind.

Jesus asks you to love God with all your *mind*. With the intellect that God has given. Loving God with your mind means searching God's word—reflecting, meditating, encountering. Loving involves wanting to know all about the beloved. Wanting to know the beloved more clearly.

And letting yourself be drawn closer to the Holy One, in your deepest places. Loving God with all your *soul*, with your spirit. Becoming lost in awe and wonder. Taking joy in the intimacy of communion, of shared relationship. Opening yourself to listen and to bend your will to the will of the One whose desire for justice and peace for human creatures becomes your desire as well. A desire of your heart.

The tender, self-giving kind of heart Paul has for the believers he writes to at Thessalonica.

Loving God with all your *heart* finds expression in acts of compassionate caring for the neighbor. I share with you a story.

One day last month, after a meeting with our Superintendent at the district office on Columbia's north side, I walked out to the parking lot and noticed that the car's right front tire was very low. By the time I drove on it just a couple of blocks to the nearest gas station, the tire was flat. And even if it would have done any good to put air in the tire, the air machine was out of order.

Well. I was up the proverbial creek. I was by myself. And had unwisely left the parsonage without either cash or checkbook. Someone at the gas station directed me to a business on the same block. A business where cars are serviced.

Now this establishment didn't look too promising. It wasn't what you would call clean. Part of the sign stating the name of the business was missing. Some men were sitting around outside, shooting the breeze. There were several vehicles in varying states of disrepair. And *no one* at this place looked like me.

But a woman waiting in the next car told me: "You've come to the right place."

That's when one of the owners of the business appeared beside my car. I'll call him Terry, because that's his name. Terry saw that there was a tack in the tire. Terry didn't say he had customers in front of me. Terry didn't say I'd have to wait. Terry didn't say *come back later*. No. Right then and right there, Terry jacked up the car and he got the tools he needed and he pulled out the tack and he plugged that tire. When I asked Terry what was owed, he named an unbelievably modest amount. And his business doesn't take credit cards. Terry trusted me to mail him a check. Because of the kindness of Terry—who happens to be a United Methodist—I was able to be on my way with a grateful heart, to drive back to Fairfield County, to be about all that needed to be done that day.

Terry saw someone in need. His heart filled with compassion. And he acted. It didn't matter that that someone didn't look like him, any more than it mattered to the Good Samaritan in Jesus' story. In those few minutes, Terry showed all of us there how to be a neighbor.

In Terry that September morning, I saw reflected the One who doesn't just *quote* these two great commandments to love. I saw the One who personifies them. Who embodies them. Who

shares an intimate, prayerful relationship with his Father. Who feeds the hungry. Who heals the sick. Who embraces the child. Who cares for the forgotten. Who eats with sinners and outcasts.

Who gives us a radical new definition of just who and where your neighbor is.

In this same Gospel according to Matthew, Jesus describes the difficult, demanding nature of loving God and the neighbor. *If anyone strikes you on one cheek, turn the other also. If someone demands your coat, give your shirt, too. If you're forced to go one mile, go a second mile as well.* Jesus asks you to love with a love that puts the well-being of your neighbor above your own—even if you believe that person to be your enemy.

And at Golgotha—just three days after this confrontation with opponents—he offers himself in the ultimate demonstration of what it means to love the One who sent him and to love the neighbors that fill this world.

Jesus loves you so much that he went to the cross. His cross has two pieces. The vertical piece reminds us of the command to love the One who reigns over us, the One who is above us. And the horizontal piece makes us think of the command to love

neighbors who are here on this earth with us. These are the two dimensions of the cruciform life.

The cross-shaped life is a life of living love.

Living love, love that isn't pressed between the pages of a two-thousand year old book, but is the love of our Lord who is risen!

Living love that is real and true.

Living love that Jesus has shown you and shows you still and will keep on showing you through every one of your tomorrows.

Living love that, as his useful vessel, *you* can pour out in this world that stands in such desperate need of it.

Living love that he calls you to place at the center of your life in him.

Your life in this blessed One who today asks you these questions: *What do you think of the Christ? You who know the greatest commandments, what do you think of the way I've lived my life?*

Will you answer by following in his way of living love?

In the name of God the Father, God the Son, and God the Holy Spirit. Amen.