

## ALL LOVE IS LOCAL

October 23, 2011

Just for a moment I want you to imagine...imagine a crisis so crucial and a cause so compelling that it brought together and made allies of Michelle Bachman and Nancy Pelosi, or Al Sharpton and Glenn Beck, or Jesse Jackson and Pat Robertson. Imagine that for a moment and, as you do, listen once more to the introductory verses of today's lesson from the gospel of Matthew:

***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.***

Let me tell you about Pharisees and Sadducees. The Pharisees were Bible experts. The Pharisees knew the Torah – the law of Israel – inside and out. And, for them, purpose was found in the law and the moral living it commands. Every commandment for the Pharisees that was either kept or broken was significant, and in the keeping or the breaking is found the meaning of life. The Pharisees despised wealth and prestige. They were the champions of the common people.

And now for the Sadducees. The Sadducees were those folks who loved and maintained the temple in Jerusalem. Their purpose was found in the ritual and the pageantry of worship. The Sadducees were sticklers for seamless grandeur and glory...grandeur and glory for the sake of beauty, not meaning. (You see, the Sadducees thought there was no resurrection.) The Sadducees despised the common people. They were the champions of the wealthy and the elite. Sadducees and Pharisees...sworn enemies...but, because Jesus had invaded their city of Jerusalem, they came together...Pharisees and Sadducees together...and they brought the Herodians along, too...the Herodians who supported Caesar's puppet king...and they all came together in this alliance to trick and to trap Jesus. It was a tag team. First the Pharisees went at Jesus...then the Herodians...then the Sadducees...and now the Pharisees again. Listen to the question that their spokesman asked:

***“Teacher, he said, “Which commandment in the law is the greatest?”***

And with those three groups together, there was going to be an answer from Jesus that was going to do Him in with at least one of them because, you see, the Pharisees said, ***all the commandments matter. There isn't one that's great.*** The Sadducees said, none ***of the commandments matter.*** And the Herodians, they said, ***well, only Herod's commandments matter.***

Jesus' answer to that question put two commandments together and forged them – welded them – into one. First, Jesus took a phrase from Deuteronomy, Chapter 6: the phrase that Israel calls the ***Shema***. Shema: it means to hear. It's the most precious command to all of Israel. Deuteronomy 6 is the little tiny scroll that's rolled up and fitted inside of the mezuzahs that are on the doorposts of Jewish homes. Deuteronomy 6:

***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.***

The other passage that Jesus brought in, the other commandment that Jesus found was an obscure one; one buried in the law codes of Leviticus in the nineteenth chapter. That commandment says:

***You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.***

Jesus' answer was brilliant. Listen to the synthesis that he made.

***“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.”***

The answer was so spectacular that, after that, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees and the Herodians knew that they could not discredit Jesus with words alone. So they began to conceive another more sinister way to destroy Him.

***“You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.”***

Jesus counted these commands as two. But, by my count, they're three...three commands of divine love: ***Love God. Love your neighbor. And love yourself.*** So, this morning, let's begin in the middle. Let's begin with that second command: ***love your neighbor.*** It is, you know, ethical for us to care for others: not just religious, but ethical for us to care for others. Yet in our culture, neighbors are often our problem, not our blessing...and certainly not our salvation. So hating our neighbors is something that, when we become afraid, we become pretty good at...and not doing the things that are neighbors are desperate for can even become a popular solution to our own difficulties. This week I have been finding uncommon pieces of wisdom on Facebook. Here's the first.

***Sometimes I want to ask God why He allows poverty, famine and injustice in the world when He could do something about it, but I'm afraid He might just ask me the same question.***

What does it mean to love our neighbors?

Next, the first command: ***love God.*** You know, some folks think God is just a superstitious mystery that we can get over if we just get smarter. Some of us love God out of obligation and fear because we're afraid of what God might do to us if we don't. Some of us love God only when there's a crisis in our lives and we know we need help. And, in our culture, the news is that more and more of us think that God is just simply irrelevant...that God doesn't matter...that God doesn't connect with the lives we live.

But loving God isn't about obligation. It isn't about fear. It's about joy and the spontaneous expression of the goodness of God's love that's fixed in our hearts. To love God, not for any other purpose except because God loves us and it is our rejoicing to do so. I will never forget a member of a church I served a number of years ago who every morning when she got

up...before she did anything else (and yes, I mean anything else!). she went to the piano and played and sang the doxology. That's the joy of loving God.

Finally, the command is to *love ourselves*. Now I know that it can seem like we're experts at this one. We may even characterize our culture as having a pandemic of narcissism. But the question is; do we really love ourselves? Do we? Or do we simply satiate, and indulge, and medicate, and intoxicate, and anesthetize and abuse ourselves so that we don't have to face who we really are? Back to Facebook. When asked what thing about humanity surprises you the most, the Dalai Lama answered:

***“Man....because he sacrifices his health in order to make money. Then he sacrifices money to recuperate his health. And then he is so anxious about the future that he does not enjoy the present; the result being that he does not live in the present or the future; he lives as if he is never going to die, and then dies having never really lived.”***

How do we love ourselves?

Friends, these are not three separate commands: love God...love neighbor...love self. They belong together. Because, of course, the truth is that we can't love God unless we love our neighbors. And we can't love our neighbors unless we love God. And we can't love ourselves unless we love our neighbors, and we can't love our neighbors unless we love ourselves. And we can't love ourselves without loving God. And, we can't love God without loving ourselves. Jesus doesn't give us these three commands in any order of priority. They are equal and they are complimentary. They belong together, all three. They are, indeed, the three great dimensions of the imperative to love in every facet of our lives.

You see, divine love reaches as high as the heavens...or as low as the forgotten ones, the ones who die from the deprivation of food, and water, and shelter, and clothing and medicine. Divine love makes rude the most elegant of luxuries by comparison...even as it makes luxurious the provision of simple necessities. Divine love is the passionate connection of human intimacy...even as it is the power to open and heal the painful secrets of the human heart. Divine love is not an idea that's isolated in the head...nor is it a feeling that's imprisoned in the heart. No, divine love is a relationship. It's a relationship to be lived in all the beautiful and, yes, challenging particularities of this human family, the family that belongs to God.

Former Speaker of the House Tip O'Neill famously said: ***All politics is local***. Successful politicians know that that's true. Herbert Hoover, when he was running for President, said it this way: ***A chicken in every pot and a car in every garage***. All politics is local...because all politics is about self-interest.

Well, the same is true for love. You see, all love is local...but not in the same way that politics is local. All love is local. But all love is about the interests of others. In his letter to the church at Thessalonica, the Apostle Paul wrote:

***As you know and as God is our witness, we never came with words of flattery or with a pretext for greed; nor did we seek praise from mortals, whether from you or from others, though we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, like a nurse tenderly caring for her own children. So deeply, do we care for***

*you that we are determined to share with you not only the gospel of God, not only the gospel of God, but also our own selves, because you have become very dear to us.*

***Not only the gospel of God but also our own selves:*** that phrase assumes the gospel. It assumes that the gospel is the foundation of everything we are and believe. The gospel...the good news that says that God's love embraces and forgives, and heals, and guides us so that we can commit to the power of love in our lives...that's the gospel. But we didn't share only the gospel of God in words; we shared it with our hearts. ***Love deeply from the heart*** is what makes the gospel real. Without it, it's simply empty phrases.

Today we welcome seven new members to this congregation. And, folks, I hope you have come because we have good ideas, and effective programs, and because we serve God and others in this world. But, most importantly, I pray that you've come because you have felt the care and the love of this congregation deeply from the heart. Without that, none of the other matters: ***not only the gospel of God, but our own selves because you are very dear to us.***

Our German visitors were here for five days last week. Jeanie and I had never met them. Five short days...and you know what they say about company: it smells like fish after three! But not these folks! Five days...and we'd never met...and yet what we shared is the gospel; the church that reaches all the way around the world and makes it up-close, and heartfelt, and personal. What we shared is Jesus and, in five days, we fell in love with each other so that, when we left them in Greendale on Tuesday, there were tears...and the tears came from our guest who knows the least English because, of course, there is no language barrier when the language is love.

Friends, the church's work isn't just making ethical people. The church's work is the work of love. It's the work of God's love that makes our love possible...because, without God's love, we cannot ever presume to love.

Yes, all love is local. It's up close and it's personal. It's down, and it's dirty, and it's tough sometimes...but it's also divine. All love is local and maybe, just maybe, if we learn to love, then Michelle Bachman...and Nancy Pelosi...and Al Sharpton...and Glenn Beck...and Jesse Jackson...and Pat Robertson can all become one: one with us in the language that we all understand, and speak, and live...the language that God has given us...the language of love.

***When the Pharisees heard that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered and one of them – a lawyer – asked Him a question to test Him. “Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus 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 – these two – hang all the law and the prophets.”***

Love God...love neighbor...love yourself: we can't do any unless we do them all. Amen.

Charles E. Mize  
Union Congregational United Church of Christ  
Green Bay, Wisconsin  
October 23, 2011