

“Loving God and Loving Others”
Sermon by Ted Wilkinson, Seminary Intern
Peace United Church of Christ
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I would like to start by thanking you all for being incredibly warm, welcoming and supportive. I know I haven't been here long, but it wouldn't take anyone very long to realize what a loving, great community this is. It almost makes writing sermons hard because if I didn't like you I would say "I'll phone it in".

This story takes place in the days before Jesus' death and his Apostles have come to Jerusalem for the Passover. Because this is a huge Jewish holiday, every Jew in the Roman Empire who is able is in Jerusalem. Jesus, like most other Jews, has come to the Temple, and He is teaching and debating with other Rabbis. This question comes after two other questions posed to Jesus that day. The first is about taxes, which shows us that not much has changed in the last 2000 years, as taxes are still a "hot button" issue. The second is about marriage and resurrection, and the third one posed is which one is the greatest Commandment. Some scholars I have read see this as some last stitch effort to try and "trip up" Jesus, but I see it as an actual, very interesting theological problem.

What IS the greatest Commandment? What, above all else, does God want us to focus on? There are 613 different laws and Commandments in the Torah. That is quite a lot. They range from the obvious "don't kill" and "don't steal" to the seemingly bizarre "don't eat eagles or vultures". It is a complex, and sometimes confusing, network of laws, so how do we decide what is important? Jesus tells us to love God and to treat our neighbor as ourselves. Well, that was easy. The sermon is over. It looks like we're going to wrap up a little early today. I'd like to thank Tom for inviting me here.

When I was a child sitting in a pew, I always dreamed the priest would say that because I would be bored and be thinking "It's so simple. Love God. Treat others with respect. It's the most obvious thing in the world. Why are we still here? Why am I not asleep at home", but is this passage as straightforward as my 10-year-old self seemed to believe?

When the Gospel was written years after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Apostle writing it probably found new and relevant meaning in these words when, for him, the early Christian community had found an increasing number of gentile Christians joining what had once been a strictly Jewish sect. The question arose "What does it mean to be Christian?" Must one first become Jewish with all the cultural and religious demands that the laws of the Old Testament offer? This is a question that Paul struggled with for his entire ministry. Must we follow the hundreds of laws, none of them, or is there another solution?

Jesus said something rather interesting. Rather than stating that we must obey all the laws all the time, or giving us a list of laws we should obey and ones He doesn't feel are important anymore, He, instead, stated not what the law says but what the law means. I'll say that again. For Jesus, what is important about the law is not what the law says, but what it means to do and what its intention is. You see, we often think of laws, especially religious laws as just something that we have to follow, and rarely do we think about why these are rules we should follow. Why does God care if we steal or lie? Why does God want us to have a day of rest? Is it really important that I don't eat any vultures? They could be delicious. I don't know. I've never had one. Maybe they taste like chicken. Who knows?

Jesus sums it up and boils it down for us: “Love your God with all your heart, soul and mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself”. Now, he lists the importance of loving God first, and the way he describes it is with our “heart, our soul and our mind”. It is not to say that we need to love God a whole lot but to explain that we should orient ourselves towards God. When we point our heart, mind and soul towards God, we orient our lives to follow God, and by doing this, this encompasses all of the laws and Commandments concerning our actions towards God that are found in the Torah.

The second commandment to “Love thy neighbor as thyself” is a way of simplifying what all the laws concerning people are trying to get across. It is an interesting way of looking at ethics that seems self-evident. If you wouldn’t want someone to do something to you, then don’t do it to someone else. If you don’t want to be punched, don’t punch somebody else. If you don’t want to be lied to, then don’t lie to your friend. It seems obvious yet, oftentimes, we don’t follow this obvious advice. We often think of this commandment only as things we shouldn’t do, but the commandment is also addressing what we should do for others. If our friend is hurting and we, in their position, would want to be comforted, we should comfort them. If our friend is in trouble and we, being in their position, would need help, then we should provide it as we are able. This one commandment has far reaching effects that both covers the law of the Torah and encompasses far more.

Jesus, by stating it this way, is also rebelling against the misuse of the law he sees in his day. The Sabbath was made so that people would have a day of rest, but it was taken to such extremes in those days that, for the poor, who had no ability to save up money and could only make enough to eat each day, the Sabbath meant to them the one day out of the week they would have to starve because they could not work.

The Purity Laws that were followed by the Sadducees were probably put in place originally to combat disease and to establish a unique Jewish identity. In Jesus’ time, it was followed so strictly that the blind and the lame who needed God most were kept out of the Temple. Jesus was concerned that people were doing what the law says but not what the law intends.

The second commandment “Love thy neighbor as thyself” could sometimes be seen as secondary, or less important than the first if we ignore the words that come before it and the second commandment is like the first. This doesn’t mean that it is like the first commandment in word structure, as a rule, but it is like the first in importance. This is where we get to the interesting aspect of the text. Jesus is saying that the two commandments are of equal importance, not because being good to other people is just as important as loving God. They are of equal importance because they are interconnected. Being good to other people is loving God, and loving God is being good to other people. It is a different way of understanding how we worship God. Jesus connects love of others to love of God.

Right action to other people has always been a priority of the prophets. Whenever God called a prophet forth like Jeremiah, their two biggest concerns were always proper worship of God and how we treat other people, specifically those who could not defend themselves such as widows and orphans. The connection to the Old Testament goes further than that, for this is not a new commandment that Jesus is giving us, but to “love God with all your heart, soul and mind” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” are paraphrases of verses found in Deuteronomy and Leviticus.

Jesus is merely pointing out what the Pharisees and the Sadducees have forgotten and what we sometimes forget today. We do not follow the law for the law’s sake. We follow the law because it helps us find communion with God and helps us to enact God’s love and mercy and do God’s work here on earth. To give an example from the New Testament, we merely need to look at how Christ taught us to pray. In the Lord’s Prayer, we ask God to do many things for us,

but what is the one thing that we are expected to do? We should all know this—to forgive others their sins against us, to do for them what we hope God will do for us and what we would hope they would do for us as well. We are asked only to treat our neighbor as ourselves.

When we here at Peace UCC help in food drives, or participate in the CROP Walk later today, it is not just a nice thing to do (though it would be nice to get out in this lovely weather before it starts snowing, apparently), but doing these things to help others is worshipping God because we are helping others as we are able and enacting both God's will and the spirit and intent of the law. To sum up, it turns out that my 10-year-old self was right. This is pretty simple, but it is also pretty powerful, too. Amen.

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