



October 25, 2026 • 22nd Sunday after Pentecost • Moment for Mission • In-Person and Online Worship

“Love”

Sermon by Rev. Greg Batson

Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, an expert in the law, 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.”

Jesus got into a lot of arguments with the religious leaders of his day and they were mostly arguments about how to interpret the Hebrew scriptures. The Pharisees were acknowledged as the Bible experts of Jesus’ day. They studied them daily, both the texts themselves and the interpretations of the rabbis passed down through the generations. Jesus read and quoted these same Hebrew scriptures but had a very different interpretation of them. That led to many conflicts with the Pharisees who struggled to keep control of the faith. In our gospel lesson today from Matthew, the Pharisees tried one more time to trap Jesus in what they considered to be his blasphemous views.

“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”, they asked? (Matt 22:36). There are 613 different commandments in the Torah, so Jesus had many to choose from. There are the ten commandments of course: I am the Lord your God, you shall have no other gods before me. Make no idols. Do not take God’s name in vain. Remember the sabbath and keep it holy. These and the others are very important. But what about the other 603? They include commandments such as these. Do not sow different kinds of seed together in one field (Lev 19:19). Do not tattoo the body (Lev 19:28). Do not shave your beard (Lev 19:27). Do not wear garments made of wool and linen mixed together (Deut 22:11). Obviously not all commandments are created equal. So, which one is the greatest?

The first commandment that Jesus quotes is from Deuteronomy, and it was not a surprise to any of the Pharisees. “You shall love the Lord your God with all of your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” (Matt 22:37, Deut 6:5) This verse is something every Jew knew by heart. It is from a portion of the Torah called the Shema, and it is recited at every Shabbat service in a synagogue around the world to this day. It is the central belief of Judaism – there is only one God of the universe, and God should therefore be the center of our devotion and purpose in life.

But let’s be honest: following this commandment is easier said than done. How do we always put God first in our lives? Frederick Buechner summed up the challenge this way:

Love God. We have heard the words so often that we no longer hear them. They are too loud to hear, too big to take in. We know the words so much by heart that we scarcely know them any longer as words spoken to our heart out of a mystery beyond all knowing. We take the words so much for granted that we hardly stop to wonder where they are seeking to take us.¹

If God is love, then we are asked to return love to its very source. That comes through worship, prayer, song, and silence, acknowledging God is greater than we anything we can conceive or imagine.

¹ Frederick Buechner, “Love,” *Secrets in the Dark: a Life in Sermons* (HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 99.

Maybe that's why Jesus gave a second part to his answer to the Pharisee's question. He quoted a second commandment from Leviticus: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Lev 19:18). Loving God with all of our being is only a partial answer. We must also love our fellow human beings with that same kind of love. We must put God's love into action by loving others, not only for their sake but for our own. We really can't know and love ourselves unless we are able to love others.

The beauty of Jesus' answer is that these two commandments, joined together as the Great Commandment, are the foundation for the living of our faith. It takes both kinds of love to make us complete. One is a total commitment of our lives to God, reflecting God's love for us back to God. The other is a commitment to love one another, reflecting God's love for us to our fellow human beings. Combining these two ways to show love provides a standard by which we measure our actions. All of the other commandments fall under those two categories.

Mother Teresa is an example of sharing this kind of love of neighbor. She dedicated her life to feeding and caring for the poorest of the poor in Calcutta, India. This is one of her memories:

In 25 years, we have picked up more than 36,000 people from the streets and more than 18,000 have died a most beautiful death. When we pick them up from the street we give them a plate of rice. In no time we revive them. A few nights ago we picked up four people. One was in a most terrible condition, covered with wounds, full of maggots. I told the sisters that I would take care of her while they attended to the other three. I really did all that my love could do for her. I put her in bed and then she took hold of my hand. She had such a beautiful smile on her face and she said only, "Thank you."; Then she died. There was a greatness of love. She was hungry for love, and she received that love before she died. She spoke only two words, but her understanding of love was expressed in those two words.²

We don't have to be at the Mother Theresa-level to love our neighbor. The seemingly smallest acts of kindness and compassion can demonstrate the greatest love. In a world where so many feel disconnected and isolated, a greeting and short conversation can make a huge difference. A prayer for someone in need, a phone call or a visit, communicates love for your neighbor, that they are not alone. Volunteering to pack a food box, donate clothing, make a lunch or hygiene kit are tangible ways to say you care to someone you don't even know. Singing with someone, reading a book with a child, sharing a coffee with someone during our fellowship hour – they all share one thing in common – love for our neighbor.

The amazing thing about loving your neighbor is that it goes both ways. The person receiving our act of love is changed by it, but so are when we revive their love in response. The "thank you" that Mother Theresa received from the dying woman transformed her faith in God. Whenever we open our ourselves to others through an act of grace, we open our own hearts to receive grace as well. Jesus knew that, so he added this second commandment to the first – to love God is to love one another.

I read Pope Leo XIV's Encyclical, *Magnifica Humanitas* ("Magnificent Humanity") this past week. It is commonly called the AI encyclical as it focuses on the dangers that unrestricted Artificial Intelligence poses to humanity. Pope Leo's theological argument is based on the belief that all human beings possess inherent and equal dignity. It begins with God's love, expressed in the person of Jesus Christ, who became flesh like us. Every human person is created in the image and likeness of God and does not depend on their abilities, wealth or position. Human dignity is "a gift that precedes and transcends each person, endowed by God an expression of [God's] unfailing love."³

Therefore, when an individuals' human dignity is threatened by a system – political, economic, or technological – it is counter to the command to love God and love one another. When our society views reality as a "limit", like illness, suffering

² John Shea, "On Earth as It Is in Heaven," *The Spiritual Wisdom of the Gospel for Christian Preachers and Teachers* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 308.

³ Pope Leo XIV, *Magnificent Humanity: On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence* (Word on Fire, 2026), 44-45.

or old age, it denies our humanity. “Those who loves and desire cannot avoid passing through trial and suffering,” Pope Leo writes, “and over the years, we carry within lessons that leave their mark like scars, the memories of a journey shaped by freedom and failure, dreams and disappointments.”⁴ The paradox of faith is that we find God, connect with God, thought the limits of our existence, of what make us human. That is how we know what it means to be loved; not measured by our successes, but by the grace that is given to us when we fail.

Love your neighbor and you will discover the love of God, Jesus says. That is the power of the Great Commandment. If God seems too distant from our prayers and praise, then loving our neighbor brings us closer to God. Both are required for a full commitment to Christian discipleship. If we don’t remember anything else, remember these two scriptures. They are the North Star by which we navigate life. Amen.

⁴ Ibid., 93.