

Reformation Sunday Sermon: "**The Power of Love**"      October 29, 2017  
 Dr. Frank J. Allen, Jr., Pastor  
 First Presbyterian Church of Kissimmee, Florida

Matthew 22:34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, <sup>35</sup> and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him.

<sup>36</sup> "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

<sup>37</sup> 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.'

<sup>38</sup> This is the greatest and first commandment. <sup>39</sup> And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

<sup>40</sup> On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

TESTING

"A lawyer asked him a question to test him."  
 When a lawyer asks you a question to test you, watch out!  
 Maybe you better get your own lawyer.

Actually, this guy wasn't an attorney, he was a professional theologian.  
 He was an "expert" in the interpretation of God's law.

And he wanted to trip Jesus up.  
 He wanted to make Jesus look bad in front of the crowds.

These religious experts had tried before.  
 In the Scripture that precedes our lesson for today,  
 the Pharisees begin their interrogation of Jesus with a political question.

If you want to get someone in trouble, just bring up politics.  
Works every time.

They said, “Hey, Jesus, we were just wondering,  
Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

That was a pretty tricky question.

If Jesus said they should pay their taxes, then the people would reject Jesus.

After all Caesar was a pretty harsh ruler.

He had taken over the Promised Land by the use of military might.

On the other hand, if Jesus said,

“That scoundrel Caesar doesn’t deserve one penny of our money...”  
well, you know what would happen.

The Pharisees wouldn’t have to worry about Jesus any more.

Caesar and his minions would take care of Jesus...permanently.

Of course we know how Jesus replied to all this.

He took a coin and asked,

“Whose picture is on this coin?”

And they said, “Caesar’s.”

And Jesus said, “Well, there’s your answer.

Give Caesar the things that are Caesar’s

and give God the things that are God’s.”

That was really a very clever way to avoid answering the question, at least directly.

But, it wowed the crowd, and the Pharisees decided to huddle up and think of another question.

## SADDUCEES

In the meantime another rival religious group, the Sadducees tried to trip Jesus up.

The Sadducees didn’t ask a question about politics.

They asked a question about a very divisive religious issue.

The Sadducees didn't believe in the resurrection.

They didn't sing "Will the Circle Be Unbroken?"  
They didn't sing about heaven and "The Unclouded Day."  
They thought all that talk about heaven was foolish.

And to prove their point they asked their own trick question  
Their question involved a woman who was married to many different brothers before she died.

(In order for this to happen a lot of improbable things had to happen. But, that didn't matter. The Sadducees just wanted to make fun of the idea of the resurrection.)

Anyway, after telling this long convoluted tale, the Sadducees asked,  
"So who will be married to this lady in heaven?"

And Jesus said,  
"Silly Sadducees.  
In heaven we'll be like angels.  
The old rules about marriage don't apply.

And by the way, if you don't believe in the resurrection, how could God tell Moses,  
I am the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob?  
God speaks in the present tense in this passage,  
and God is God of the living...not the God of the dead."

Once again the crowd was wowed by Jesus.  
They hadn't heard that interpretation of Scripture before.

The Sadducees didn't have a comeback.

So...they too slink back into the crowd.

## THE GREATEST COMMANDMENT

That brings us to our lesson for today.  
The Pharisees decide to trip Jesus up in a different way.

Instead of testing him on politics or controversial theological topics, they test him on his knowledge.

If the people see that Jesus is just a country bumpkin who doesn't know Scripture,  
then he'll be discredited.

The church lawyer asks,  
"So, what's the greatest commandment.  
Summarize all of Scripture in one sentence!"

The Pharisees meant to put Jesus to the test, to embarrass him.  
But, instead they gave Jesus the opportunity to proclaim the heart of the gospel.

Jesus said,  
"The greatest commandment is that you shall love the Lord your God with  
all your heart, soul and mind."

Everyone knew that.  
That was like the Apostle's Creed.  
They said it every day.

But, Jesus also said,  
"And there's another commandment that is like the first one.  
'Love your neighbor as yourself.'

If you do those two things you'll be fine.  
The rest of the Bible is just commentary!"

Jesus followed this up by asking the Pharisees a question about the Messiah.

And since these religious experts had no clue.  
So, they too blended back into the crowd.

Once again the crowd was wowed by Jesus' answer.

And the Bible tells us that nobody dared to ask Jesus any more questions after that.

I'm grateful that this lawyer quizzed Jesus about the most important commandment.

To tell you the truth, sometimes I get so involved with the minutia of life that I lose sight of the big picture.

Jesus' answer gives us that big picture.

Like the Pharisees, I can quote this passage by heart.

But, do I take it to heart?

Is love of God and love of neighbor a guiding principle in my everyday life?

It depends.

Some days yes.

Some days not so much.

We're accustomed to thinking of love as an emotion.

And certainly strong emotions are associated with that word, love.

But, can we do something to encourage love?

I believe we can.

And this passage lights the way.

## HEART AND SOUL

In this passage we are commanded to love God with all our heart, with all our soul and with all our mind.

Those first two mean essentially the same thing. The heart and the soul are basically the seat of our emotions and our desires.

Many of us know what it means to love someone with all our heart and soul.

I can remember a time when all my waking hours were spent thinking about that special someone. I loved her with all my heart. Still do.

I love my children with all my heart.  
I would give them anything I have to help them.  
I am always with them and for them.

These past few years I've learned what it means to love as a grandfather.

Once again my heart has been stolen by these little ones who have come into my life.

I'm sure many of you know what it means to love someone from the heart and soul.

You want to be with that person more than anyone else.  
You love them with all your heart and soul.

And yet, human love is fragile.

Sometimes we give away our heart, and it gets broken.  
Sometimes we hurt the ones we love the most.

Sometimes the ones we love the most hurt us.  
Sometimes time and distance make the heart grow cold.

## STEADFAST LOVE

Our love is fragile.  
And no matter how strong our love is, one day it will end.

God's love is different.

When we think about loving God with all our heart, we should remember that unlike our fragile and fickle love, God's love is steadfast. The Bible tells us that the steadfast of the Lord never ceases. His mercies never come to an end. (See Lamentations 3:22-23)

God's love is eternal.  
God's love is always there even when we are absent.

Jesus said that God is like the Father who is always willing to welcome us home

...even when it is our own sinful actions that have taken us to the far country.

God first loved us with all His heart.  
 God sent His Son, his very soul for our salvation.  
 This is a love that we can trust.

Have you ever said of someone,  
 "I would trust my life to him (or her)."

That's what we say about God.

That's what it means to have faith.

And that's what it means to love God with all our heart and with all our soul.

## LOVING GOD WITH OUR MIND

But, in order to love God in this way, we must also love God with all our mind.

Someone's heart can be in the right place,  
 but good intentions are not good enough.

Indeed, if our love of God is not firmly grounded in God's story, we can easily fall into idolatry.

We can love a god of our own making instead of the one true God.

This is a danger for all of us.

In the passages that follow our lesson for today Jesus roundly criticizes the religious leaders of the day for their hypocrisy and their pride.

They were, according to Jesus, "blind guides of the blind".

Now it would be easy for us to say,

"You tell'm Jesus.

Those religious leaders of old certainly were hypocrites.

They were supposed to be religious experts,

but they didn't pay attention to the most basic passages of Scripture!"

But, the hypocrisy of the religious leaders in Jesus' day should be a cautionary tale for us.

They used Scripture not as a way to love God with their mind.

They used Scripture as a way to win arguments and gain advantage.

That's still going on.

And when we do that,  
Scripture itself can become an idol instead of a means of grace.

How can we avoid this?

We love God with our mind.

To say it another way:

We come to Scripture expecting to hear and experience the love of God.

## TRADITION VERSUS SCRIPTURE

Sometimes we spend too much time listening to what others say about Scripture,  
and not enough time actually hearing the words of Scripture for our-self.

This happened in Jesus' day.

Traditions and commentary of the law had become so voluminous that many religious leaders had actually replaced God's word with the teachings of men. (By the way, I'm not being sexist. In those days men did all the teaching!)

But, lest we be too critical of those ancient religious leaders,  
let us hasten to say that the same thing happened in the church.

This Sunday is Reformation Sunday.

So, let me give you the essence of the Reformation in a nutshell.  
People loved the teachings of men, tradition more than Scripture.

This led to hypocrisy and corruption in the church.

The Reformers said that if we are truly going to love God with our mind, then Scripture (and not tradition) should be the ultimate authority. If we want to love God, then we need to know God's story, and we need to have a mind for that story.

In other words, instead of shaping Scripture to fit our story, we allow ourselves to be shaped by God's story.

We love God with our mind...as well as our heart and soul.

## ALWAYS REFORMING

This is a continuing struggle.

"The church reformed and always reforming" is an oft heard motto in the church.

It goes back to Augustine and was popularized by the theologian, Karl Barth.

First, a note about what this motto doesn't mean.

It doesn't mean that newer is better.

The full quote is "the church reformed and always being reformed according to the Word of God."

This motto presents a challenge to both liberal and conservative impulses in the church.

We often think that innovation is the secret to success in the church.

The reformers, on the other hand, wanted to get back to the root of the faith.

This sounds strange to our ears, but for them older was better.

They wanted to submit themselves to the authority of Scripture and so they rejected anything that was not essential.

A while back a pastor from another religious tradition visited our church and made a comment about the appearance of our sanctuary. He said that it was "plain" and almost "stark".

We see in his comment about our church a direct influence of the Reformation.

The reformers removed many visual representations of the faith in order to focus more on the Word. In the view of many reformers, sometimes artistic and symbolic representations could be distractions instead of aids to worship.

In many churches influenced by the Reformation the pulpit was placed at the front of the church in the middle of a raised area to indicate the centrality of God's Word to the life and ministry of the church.

So the church reformed and always reforming does not mean that we are the "church of what's happening now" as comedian Flip Wilson once put it.

## CHURCH THE OBJECT OF REFORM

Second, this motto, "reformed and always reforming" doesn't mean that this is something that the church can do for itself. "Always reforming" should really be translated in the passive voice "always being reformed."

In other words, the church is not the agent of reform.

The church is the object of reform.

God is reforming the church through the power of God's Word and Spirit.

Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians wrote,

"...We take every thought captive to obey Christ..." (2 Corinthians 10:5)

When we love God with our mind and study Scripture, we don't study to find confirmation for what we already believe.

We study to discover God's will for our life.

We want to think God's thoughts after God.

We take every thought captive.

## LOVE FOR NEIGHBOR

But, the acid test of our love for God is what we know but what we do.

We are to “love our neighbor as we love ourselves.”

So what does this mean?

In another gospel a religious leader responds to this command with a question.

And exactly who is my neighbor?

We can't love everyone.

So what are the limits of love?

Is it everyone in my subdivision?

Is it just the folks on my street?

Are we just talking about folks born in the USA?

In response Jesus told the story of the Good Samaritan.

As most of you know it was the Samaritan, an outsider, an “enemy” who was compassionate toward a traveler in need. The Samaritan proved to be a good neighbor to the wounded traveler.

So, the answer to the question,

“Who is my neighbor?” is:

Anyone who is in need.

That makes for a very big neighborhood!

And it is readily apparent that this is something that we can't do on our own.

Sometimes we have trouble loving the people closest to us ...much less those we do not know or understand.

But, God in Christ can do more than we imagine.

What we can do is be open to a variety of people and situations and ask,

“Might this be the neighbor that God would have me love?”

Love in this case is not an emotion.

It is an act of the will.

It is doing something because, as Paul put it, we have made every thought captive in order to obey Christ.

Love of God needs to be expressed in a down to earth way. In John's first letter we read that "those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen." (1 John 4:20)

## SELF-LOVE

But, you may have noticed that there's one more qualifier put on loving the neighbor.

We love our neighbor as we love our-self.

Those with a psychological bent have seized on this phrase: "loving others as we love our-self."

Could this mean that a positive self image is necessary in order to love our neighbor?

I think this is certainly partially true.

Children that are abused often exhibit criminal behavior as adults. People who have a poor self image can be incredibly self-centered and maladjusted.

But, this idea of learning to love ourselves before we can learn to love others can be overdone.

In my experience the quest for self love can be endless. We just can't get enough of that self love so we never get around to loving others.

The answer to a poor self image is not just psychological. The answer is also theological.

The most important theological questions that we need to ask are:

Does God love me?  
And can God forgive me?

The answers to those questions are "yes" and "yes".

So, if that's true, we can love ourselves

...not because of who we are or what we've done...  
but because God in Christ has first loved us.

And we acknowledge God's love and forgiveness by loving and forgiving others.  
God's grace makes us into gracious people.

This is a process.  
We are a work in process.

To paraphrase a bumper sticker,

"We need to be patient with each other because God isn't finished with us yet."

But, in a community marked by love and grace,  
we can help each other become more like the people that we are called to be.

This is why the church is necessary.

The church is one place where our love for God can come down to earth.

In a world that tests our faith and rejects God's love,  
God gives us each other.

Thank God for that.

Amen.