

Proper 25 A  
Matthew 22:34-40  
October 29, 2023

“The Law of Love”  
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*When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, 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.’*

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What more is there to say, really? Love God and love your neighbor as you love yourself: the three loves – a sort of holy trinity.

Of the 613 commandments in the Torah, Jesus singled out these two as a fitting summary of the lot. As simple as they are to recite, could they really be any more difficult to actually live? Love is supposed to come easy, though, right?

Few words are as sentimentalized as this one four-letter word. We’ll call it the L-word. The L-word conjures up Hollywood images of perfect couples living perfect lives, or of a hopeless romantic laying it all on the line for their amour. We think of the emotion parents feel for their children (most of the time), the feeling we have for our partner, or even the feeling our dog has for us. “Our culture has equated love with intense

emotion. To love is a stronger response than to like. And, both are measures of a passive response to something outside us.”<sup>1</sup>

But when Jesus, and the prophets before him, commanded us to love, I don’t think they were talking about an intense emotion, about that feeling that plants butterflies in stomachs or makes hearts go pitter-patter. The kind of love they were talking about doesn’t happen to us and we don’t fall into it, or out of it. The kind of love they were talking about can be described as “a decision to *act* that then affects how we *feel*”<sup>2</sup> or as “not an emotion we feel, [but] a path we travel,”<sup>3</sup> walking in love, more of an aerobic activity than a Hallmark sentiment. Pope Francis says that this kind of love “is not sterile sentimentality or something vague, but the acknowledgment of God . . . and, at the same time, the acceptance of the other as [our] true [sibling], overcoming division, rivalry, misunderstanding, selfishness; these two things go together.”<sup>4</sup>

This kind of love doesn’t just sit in our chests or live in our heads. It lives in our hands and in our feet and in our actions. It’s embodied. This isn’t the kind of love we just *feel*, it is work that we *do* and, to be honest, it is *hard* work to do.

And, if we’re *really* being honest, we can’t do one without doing the other: can’t claim to love God without loving neighbor, can’t love neighbor without loving self, and loving self and loving neighbor *is* how we love

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<sup>1</sup> Clayton Schmit. “Commentary on Matthew 22:34-46,” Workingpreacher.org, October 23, 2011: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/commentaries/revise-common-lectionary/ordinary-30/commentary-on-matthew-2234-46-2>.

<sup>2</sup> Kathryn Matthews. “God’s Story, Our Stories,” Ucc.org, October 29, 2017: [https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/worship\\_samuel\\_sermon\\_seeds\\_october\\_29\\_2017/](https://www.ucc.org/sermon-seeds/worship_samuel_sermon_seeds_october_29_2017/).

<sup>3</sup> Debie Thomas. “Walk in Love,” Journeywithjesus.net, October 24, 2021: <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/essays/3196-walk-in-love>.

<sup>4</sup> Pope Francis. “General Audience,” Vatican.va, June 12, 2013: [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130612\\_udienza-generale.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130612_udienza-generale.html).

God. They're interconnected. But, sometimes, others are just so hard to love. Sometimes, it's just so hard to love ourselves. This kind of love requires us to hold the imperfections in one hand and grace in the other. It requires us to see the beauty and potential and the failings and flaws in ourselves and others and choose to actively love, embody love anyway. Just as we are. Just as they are.

Be gracious with yourself so that you can be gracious with others. Love yourself so that you can love others. That's what loving God looks like. And, let's be real, in a world that has seemed tragically bereft of love, your act of grace, of acceptance, of kindness, of compassion, of friendship just might be what someone else needs to keep on going. That's what it means to love our neighbors and love ourselves and love God. You can't really do one without doing all three, and our world desperately needs more love.

In her deeply moving and evocative poem, "I No Longer Pray For Peace," author Ann Weems calls the embodied, active, work of loving God, self, and others simply *miracles*. Listen:

On the edge of war, one foot already in,

I no longer pray for peace:  
I pray for miracles.

I pray that stone hearts will turn  
to tenderheartedness,  
and evil intentions will turn  
to mercifulness,  
and all the soldiers already deployed  
will be snatched out of harm's way,  
and the whole world will be  
astounded onto its knees.

I pray that all the “God talk”  
will take bones,  
and stand up and shed  
its cloak of faithlessness,  
and walk again in its powerful truth.

I pray that the whole world might  
sit down together and share  
its bread and its wine.

Some say there is no hope,  
but then I’ve always applauded the holy fools  
who never seem to give up on  
the scandalousness of our faith:  
that we are loved by God.....  
that we can truly love one another.

I no longer pray for peace:  
I pray for miracles.<sup>5</sup>

Tenderheartedness, mercy, safety; words about God turning into actions – turning into walking in love; sharing, hope; being loved in order to love... Friends, this is living, active, embodied love of God and self and others. And the true miracle is that it really can change the world. God knows, there are things that need changing.

Today, if we’re wondering how to love God, start loving yourself and others. If we’re wondering how to love others, learn to love yourself: the three loves, a trinity with the power to change the world.

May it be so. Amen.

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<sup>5</sup> Ann Weems. *Psalms of Lament*, Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1995.