

Matthew 22:34-40 **A Matter of the Heart©**
October 26, 2014 **Rev. Sharlyn Gates**

Yesterday I had the great joy of officiating at the wedding of two of our newest members – Terry and Julie Parish. I am always so blessed with that privilege of being a part of uniting a couple in marriage.

As is the case so often, they chose part of the passage from 1 Corinthians 13 as the Scripture to be read during their service. That particular passage is often called “The Love Chapter” in the bible.

It’s the part that says: “Love is patient and kind; love is not envious or boastful, or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends.”

Paul closes that chapter by writing, “Now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.”

Love is greater than faith? Greater than hope? Paul sure seems to think so. And really, if we think about it, we probably would not have any faith, any hope if we did not have love. Right?

Jesus, when asked what the greatest commandment is, answers with the familiar Old Testament passage from Deuteronomy 6 that comes from what is known as the *Shema* – which is Hebrew for “Hear.”

“Hear, O Israel, (Listen up, People!) the Lord your God is one God and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your might.”

It is a declaration that comes in the midst of a culture that has been used to worshipping many gods. Golden calves, gods of the harvest and rains, the god of Baal.

This is kind of a radical statement – to say the Lord – Yahweh, is God, the only God, that there is just one true God! And you should love this one true God with everything you have – all your heart, all your soul, all your might.

So, fast forward now to the New Testament, where Jesus ... God’s own Son is being questioned by the Jewish Leaders. Of course, they don’t believe he is God’s son and they are doing everything they can to prove it and charge him with blasphemy.

Jesus has had that discussion with the Herodians and the Pharisees regarding money and taxes, then he was put on the stand by the Sadducees (another group of leaders) regarding the resurrection of the dead.

Jesus managed to silence them, so the Pharisees come forward to take their turn again. The Pharisees were like lawyers. They were the official “keepers of the law of Moses.”

So they try to catch Jesus and see if he is up on all the law, which is kind of ridiculous, isn't it?

“Teacher,” they asked, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?” Jesus answered, “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 then Jesus adds another. “A second commandment is like the first: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

So, it sounds like Jesus is in agreement with Paul who wrote that love chapter (or maybe it's the other way around). Nothing else is greater than love.

When you think about it, it makes sense. When you think about the 10 Commandments and all the “Shalt not's” we are given, if we can love God with everything we are – if loving God is our priority, our passion – then it would seem to me that we could easily keep the rest of the commandments.

Because if we love God with every part of us – we are loving the way God loves us – passionately, totally, immeasurably and if we could love like that we could not find a place in our hearts that would want to covet our neighbor, murder someone, commit adultery, dishonor our parents, and so on.

And Jesus commandment to love others like we love ourselves – piece of cake – if we love God that way. I've always thought it was odd to say we should love others as we love ourselves. I know that the human tendency is to be all about “me.” That we tend to try to get what we want and put ourselves first. And I think that is true.

But I'm not sure that many of us can say we truly love ourselves. I kind of think we are often not so loving to others because of our own insecurities.

Bullies bully because they want to feel powerful – and don't.

Braggers brag to put themselves above others – because they don't feel adequate.

People who are mean to others are often very unhappy with themselves.

These aren't just my theories. Much of what I've studied about people in counseling and social work says the same thing.

I've known it to be true within my own self, I'm sorry to say. I know that when I've been at my worst, there is always something going on inside of me that I need to work on. And it usually causes some feelings of not liking myself very much.

Thankfully, over the years, I've come to understand these things more about myself and have gotten better at it. But the best thing of all, is coming to believe with all my heart that God loves me unconditionally.

There is nothing I have ever done or could ever do that would cause God to not love me. I am forgiven and I am free from all those things that would hold me down and keep me captive to my own chains of self contempt.

It is when I fully accept that kind of amazing love – and – my favorite thing of all – that kind of amazing grace – it is then that I am able to love others as I love myself. I have to love what God loves – a child of God, who is forgiven and made new.

When I consider that amazing love – I know there is no way I can repay God. There is nothing I can ever do to meet that standard of love. All I can do is love God with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind and strength. How could I not love God who loves me so much?

Yet, there are still many gods that would distract – that do distract us so often. We are so easily distracted by our jobs, our televisions, our computers, our cars, our sports – and even our families who certainly deserve our attention and our love.

It's hard to love God first with all we have. Yet that is what God wants. It's the greatest commandment. It's as real and important as it was in Jesus day – in Moses day. God is still God and God still wants to be first in our lives.

This time of year we turn our focus on stewardship. We tend to think mostly about our pledge of money to the church and that is important and I'll say more about why I think it's important in a minute.

And if we aren't talking about money we think of stewardship as giving our time and using our talents – those special gifts God gives to us that we can use in the church, in the ministry serving God.

That's important too and I'll say something about that as well.

But I want to remind you that practicing stewardship is about loving God. It's about understanding and deeply appreciating the fact that everything we enjoy here on earth

– everything we have in our lives – is given to us by God. It actually still belongs to God and we are the caretakers, or stewards, as the Bible calls it.

God gives us such beauty to enjoy. God gives us land and water and the warmth of the sun; the bright moon and stars. God gives us the harvest – food to eat; and family to love and enjoy.

We show our love for God by the gratitude we have; by taking care of the earth that is in our charge; by taking care of ourselves. We are practicing stewardship when we intentionally keep our focus on those good gifts, on caring for them and giving thanks for it all.

For me, and I think for many of us, we do stewardship in the church because it is God's ministry; God's mission and it is a way to show our love for God and for others by serving, giving our time, using our talents, and yes, giving some of our money to keep that ministry going.

It's one way of keeping God as God and not letting our money become god. When we commit to giving a percentage or even a certain amount, it means we trust that it will be used for God's good purposes and that God will take care of us if we put that first – maybe sometimes before a pleasure we are used to.

You may think you don't have a thing to offer, but remember, the tiniest seed can blossom into a beautiful tree! That's the way God's kingdom works.

Friends, you are loved beyond measure! You are a special, precious child of God – worthy of love because God made you, and will always love you. If you don't get anything else out of this message I hope you hear that and believe it.

For me, it is that realization that fills my heart, my soul, my mind with love for God. His love for me makes me want to strive to love him as he deserves – to make him number one in my life always. Do I sway from it? Often times, I do. But God keeps calling me back to Himself.

I've found that some of the ways I am able to show and practice my love, some of the ways I can show my gratitude, is by serving in the church and the community; by giving time; by loving and helping others; and by giving a portion of what I earn – what God has blessed me with – to the church for the ministry and mission that God calls us to. And in this present time, it is through this particular church, where we are all called as family.

I sure don't do it perfectly. But it is my heart's desire to serve God. It is a matter of heart. Loving God with all we are is a joy and act of complete gratitude.

What a privilege it is for all of us to be able to be a part of the amazing mission of God and to do it with such love, knowing we have received even more love than we are ever able to give back.

Thanks be to God for his indescribable love for us!

© Copyright 2014. All Rights Reserved.