

Community Presbyterian Church  
Cedar City, Utah

Sermon  
October 23, 2011  
Matthew 22.34-46  
"God and Neighbor"  
Pastor John Guthrie

A preacher was making his rounds to his parishioners on a bicycle, when he came upon a little boy trying to sell a lawnmower. "How much do you want for the mower?" asked the preacher. "I'm just trying to make enough money to buy a bicycle," said the little boy. After a moment of consideration, the preacher asked, "Will you take my bike in trade for it?" The boy said, "You got a deal."

The preacher took the mower and tried to crank it. He pulled on the cord a few times with no response from the mower. The preacher called the little boy over and said, "I can't get this mower to start." The little boy said, "That's 'cause you have to cuss at it to get it started." The preacher said, "I'm a minister, and I can't cuss. It's been so long since I've been saved that I don't know if I even remember how to cuss." The little boy looked at him happily and said, "Just keep pulling on that cord. It'll come back to ya!"

I wonder if Jesus ever wanted to cuss at the religious authorities who kept giving him a hard time: the Sadducees and Pharisees and Herodians, the scribes and lawyers. Actually, he came pretty close to it on one instance, and that is recorded by Matthew in the 23<sup>rd</sup> chapter, the one immediately following our reading for today. There Jesus says, not once, but seven times, "Woe to you scribes and Pharisees!" Maybe that's as close as Jesus ever got to cussing at his opponents.

Last week we saw that Jesus was challenged by a group of Herodians and disciples of the Pharisees over whether or not it was proper to pay taxes to the emperor. Then, in a passage we skipped over this week, a group Sadducees come to Jesus and ask him a rather bizarre question about marriage in heaven. Jesus answers their question, as well.

The Pharisees standing around see that Jesus has silenced the Sadducees. So this particular Pharisee, who is a lawyer (we are told) comes to Jesus and asks, "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

We are tempted to think immediately that this lawyer, like those who preceded him, is simply out to get Jesus. That may very well be true. But it may also be that he really wants to know what Jesus thinks. It may be that he is sincere in asking the question. Maybe. We just don't know.

Now remember that the Law or Torah is vast and deep. Technically it consists of the first five books of our Bible, Genesis through Deuteronomy. And according to the ancient Jewish rabbis, there are 613 separate and distinct commandments in the law. Two hundred and forty-eight of them are prescriptive, commanding some form of action or behavior. Three hundred and sixty-five of them are proscriptive, demanding abstinence from some action or behavior.

There are lots of commandments that detail how the priests of Israel were to behave. How they were to dress and prepare themselves for service. Commandments regarding ways they were to keep themselves ritually pure.

There are many commandments about proper sacrifice: remember that animals sacrificed to the LORD had to be totally without any kind of blemish. There are a handful of commandments about vows requirements for those Jews who wanted to become Nazirites, dedicated totally to the LORD. There are commandments about how to maintain ritual purity and how to deal with diseases that can make a person impure.

There are a number of commandments dealing with the giving of a tithe, or one-tenth of one's income, to the LORD. There are commandments that specify the festivals that must be kept every year: Passover and Unleavened Bread and Weeks and Atonement and Booths, and so on. There are commandments dealing with financial loans to others and guaranteeing justice and family relationships.

There are dozens of commandments prohibiting worship of false gods. There are all of those dietary prohibitions against eating pork and other kinds of unclean animals. There are a number of commandments prohibiting specific kinds of agricultural practices. There are commandments dealing with sexual relations.

So which one of these 613 commandments is the greatest? If you or I were asked that question without any advance notice, we would probably turn to the Ten Commandments, or the Decalogue, in order to provide an answer. The Ten Commandments have four instructions dealing with our relationship to the LORD, and six commandments dealing with our relationship to one another. In fact, it would be natural for us to choose the very first commandment: We are to have no other gods besides the one true God.

But that's not what Jesus does. He goes to those 613 commandments and selects the one from Deuteronomy chapter six, verse 5: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." That commandment is associated with an ancient and well-know exhortation to the Jewish people, the so-called Shema, which means "Hear!" in Hebrew. The verse before this greatest commandment reads like this: "Hear, O Israel, the LORD is our God, the LORD alone." Just about every observant Jew would have been familiar with the Shema, and its injunction to love the LORD with all of one's heart, soul, and mind.

This commandment, Jesus says, is the greatest and first commandment. Then he immediately follows with this statement, "And there is a second one like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all of the law and the prophets." That second one is also one of the 613 traditional commandments, found in Leviticus, chapter 19, verse 18.

Jesus makes it clear that there is only one greatest commandment: to love the LORD with all of one's being, but that the second one is very closely related.

The Greek word used for both love of the LORD and love of neighbor is that familiar form: agape. Agape is the self-sacrificing form of love that is used most often in the New Testament to describe the way we are meant to care for others. Here the same word is used to describe the way we are to love the LORD: sacrificing all that we have and all that we are.

If you are familiar with Luke's gospel, you may know that the lawyer in that gospel asks Jesus who is it actually, who is his neighbor. Jesus follows with the Parable of the Good Samaritan. Matthew does not include that parable.

Quite some time ago, when we began our study of Matthew, we looked at the passage in

chapter five in which Jesus tells his disciples that he has come not to abolish the Torah, but to fulfill it. It seems that is exactly what is going on in his answer to this Pharisaic lawyer. The fulfillment of the law is agape for God, and agape for neighbor. All of those 613 commandments are summarized in these two.

No one will ever claim that it is an easy thing to love a divine being whom none of us can see or touch. That kind of self-sacrificing love comes only from spending time with that being in prayer, in meditation, in reading the scriptures. In getting to know the one true God. We understand that God to be three so-called persons, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and these three display that agape love one for another. Indeed, the self-giving love demonstrated within the divine being is the model for our own love for the LORD and for others. Furthermore, the supreme expression of agape for you and me is the love that Jesus demonstrated on the cross.

Then we are to love our neighbor as we love ourselves. We might well ask ourselves the question asked by the same lawyer in Luke's gospel: Who is my neighbor? Who is our neighbor? Are our neighbors only those with whom we come into contact on a regular basis? Are they only other Christians? Do we include our spiritual relatives, the Jews? What about Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others? What about atheists? Must our neighbors live only in Cedar City? Only in Iron County? Only in the State of Utah? Only in the United States?

And here is, I think, the beginning of the answer to these questions: What guidance do we have in scripture for making distinctions between those who are our neighbors, and those who are not? What does scripture have to say about making that distinction?

Finally, a word about what agape means in the context of a community, a church, like ours. Agape is agape regardless of how one feels about a sister or a brother in Christ. Jesus knows well that we cannot instantaneously turn on or off feelings of affection for another, especially if we have been injured by that person. We cannot force ourselves to love someone, in the sense of feeling a particular emotion. But we can demonstrate agape in word and in action, and that is what we must do. Discipleship means showing common courtesy, kindness, charity, and compassion, regardless of what we may feel for another. Remember the Good Samaritan? There is no place for rudeness, unkindness, or cruelty in a Christian community. These things obviously happen frequently, because you and I are still subject to sin. When they happen a good course of action is repentance, apology, and as much reconciliation as the situation will allow.

It is also a very appropriate thing to do to pray for those with whom we have differences in this, our community, and to pray for ourselves, too. To pray for reconciliation, understanding, and restoration. That which we cannot do on our own can be done through the power of the Holy Spirit. Nothing is too hard for God.

What is the greatest of the commandments? Love the LORD, who is Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, with a self-giving, self-sacrificing love. And demonstrate the same agape love for neighbors, being very careful not to arbitrarily exclude others from the category of "neighbor."

Hey! No one said it was going to be easy. It's a very, very good thing that we have the Holy Spirit to help us when the going gets rough.