“Judgment Free Love Zone”

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Our Gospel lesson this morning opens so much that can do to and for us what the Pharisees were trying to do to Jesus. They already feel threatened by Jesus, the man, and by his teaching, and they want to put him on the spot. They want to test him. It may be that for you, as for me, you have sometimes simply heard this passage and remembered from it what are reassuring words in many ways. After all, God is all about love. We can and we do rest on this simple truth. God *is* love, and God asks us to love. Easy, right? But of course it isn’t all that easy, and mixed in the bag including God’s gracious love for us is the question of whom and how we love, and we know it isn’t always easy.

In preparing for Wednesday night’s Zoom meditation, for a focus text I landed on a passage from Dorothy Day, cofounder of the Catholic Worker Movement who was considered for sainthood by the Vatican. Among her many words of wisdom, she had this to say: “Love and ever more love is the only solution to every problem that comes up. If we love each other enough, we will bear with each other’s faults and burdens. If we love enough, we are going to light that fire in the hearts of others. And it is love that will burn out the sins and hatreds that sadden us. It is love that will make us want to do great things for each other. *No sacrifice and no suffering will then seem too much.* My prayer from day to day is that God will so enlarge my heart that I will see you all, and live with you all, in his love.”

That last sentence might be a prayer we all should lift up when we wonder how to move forward in a time, in a world when worries and fear seem to be what determine the choices we make for our behavior. “My prayer from day to day is that God will so enlarge my heart that I will see you all, and live with you all, in his love.” Someone noted this two weeks ago when in conversation following the sermon, we spoke of how difficult it is to know what is the correct or *right* path forward in the Middle East. Someone noted that fear and worry often seem to be what motivates us. Jesus suggests that the right choice regarding behavior is always to love—the Lord our God, and our neighbors as ourselves. How we do that in the face of fear and worry is the challenge.

I am sure that many of you have the same internet problem that I have—I get random email messages, often from people or from companies I don’t know. I have collected wisdom even from some of these gremlins, often with very delayed gratitude. I had received something quite some time ago and set aside, now I know for this morning. Chris Ewing wrote about this passage for one such unsolicited resource called *SermonSuite* and looking back at it this week has me want to suggest a method he suggests. Ewing focuses his discussion on the aspect of testing that is present in this passage, and reminds us that Jesus’ answer to the Pharisees’ question really isn’t as easy as it sounds. The question to us may not directly be what the greatest commandment is but may be *what matters most to us*. The question may be *what we want our lives to count for. What do I want my life to count for?*

Sometimes the question gets asked more directly. An Islamic family moves in down the street, and their children ask your children what they believe. You become friends with a Buddhist coworker, and find yourself deeply impressed with the quality of his or her life, and wondering if that same quality is available in your own tradition. The local Jehovah's Witness corners you and you wish you could put into words what it is *you* believe.

Ewing suggests that this is the kind of test that the Pharisees brought to Jesus. Here's a man who's giving amazingly penetrating responses to challenging questions. Here’s someone who faces hostility with courageous integrity, and who makes people really think about where their life is going. The Pharisees understandably want to know more about what he thinks. I’ll paraphrasing Ewing quite a bit now:

And so they come up and tap him and say, "Test ... Test.... Of the 613 commandments given in the Torah, and the hundreds more elaborated by our rabbis -- out of all these hundreds of precepts guiding our lives -- which is the most important? Or *can* we rank them? *Is* there one that is most important, or do they all have to be equally remembered and obeyed?" Maybe you have found life’s different circumstances tugging at you with similar questions, maybe even this week as we all worried about the whereabouts and actions of Robert Card, the man who so senselessly murdered so many in Lewiston. Sometimes the questions may arrive regarding less pointed moments. Is it more important to be truthful or to be kind? Is it more important to fully develop the capacities God gave me to use in this world, or to sacrifice my desires to the needs of others? As a Christian am I primarily supposed to care for and be kind to others, or am I primarily supposed to stand up for my beliefs and the Lordship of Jesus Christ? And you know what? Jesus didn't condemn the Pharisees for asking the question. I don’t believe we are condemned for our wondering either.

So what did Jesus have to say to that perennially nagging test question about what it is in our religion that matters most? Since we already "know" what answer he gave -- love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself--it may be hard for us to hear this, and to appreciate what incredible equipment we’ve been given; we’ve been given tools. Matthew just drops it into conversation and waits for it to come to light in the middle of some situation in our own lives.

So pick one. Pick something in your life that's pushing you, asking you, whether you've quite realized it or not, what your priorities are, what matters most. What's most important. Pick something that's tapping you and saying, "Test ... test...."

Okay. As you feel the tug in two directions, Ewing suggests that you *now,* as you are feeling that tug, hear Jesus say, "The greatest and first commandment is this: love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:36-37).

What do you suppose it might mean to love God with total commitment in this situation that has you tested? *(pause)* What else might it mean? *(pause)* And would somebody else have another way to look at it? *(pause)* Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

But there's more. There's another law to apply to the situation, one that accompanies and in some ways we can understand, even interprets the first. "You shall love your neighbor as yourself" (Matthew 22:39b). So, in this situation, hat might *that* mean? *(pause)* What could it mean to be as concerned for the well being of the other people involved as you are for yourself? What could it mean to seek their highest good as well as yours? *(pause)* What about the people who aren't directly involved, but who are somehow, on the sidelines, ultimately affected? *(pause)* What does it mean to hold everyone's needs as equally important in this? *(pause)* I sat with this as a meditative practice this week, because my own emotions had me really wondering. Grateful to Ann for her having shared the email, what do we do about gun violence? I hope that many of us will be part of a groundswell here, not just to talk about it, not just to hold a vigil, but to figure out what we can *do*. Using this little tactic, this tool that Jesus gave us, this law we are meant to obey, does this help you to see your way more clearly? Does it feel like something you can do? And remember, even in that moment, Jesus knew it was going to be hard. We know it can be a test.

I especially love one clarification that Ewing makes in his discussion: He says that we may wonder what it means to “love” someone. He asks whether we think it means to have warm and cozy feelings about them, which we all know isn’t going to happen all the time. Rather, love is *action* on behalf of the loved one's greatest good. There is a matter of being intention in practicing this kind of action. If we are intentional we likely will find the act accompanied by warm emotion, but it is the action itself that matters. So, we can remember our little grammar lesson from the children’s message: “love is a doing verb.”

Even facing the Pharisees’ real goa, which was to discredit Jesus—show him up as the blasphemer that he is—Jesus loved the Pharisees and answered them without judgment. And I’ll speak for myself, that’s the hard part sometimes, isn’t it? We often judge before we love. So, we can be reminded, in loving God first, and others as we love ourselves, we can sit with the test in front of us: Do we judge first, or love first? Are we going to hold others in our minds or in our accounting to a set of laws whose purpose was to keep us whole and hale *so that we are able to love*, or are we going to *act,* in love, ourselves, not just thinking about it? Our command is to love. We are made in God’s image, to love. This is our command, thanks be to God, and may we have the hearts, mind and strength equal to do it. Amen.