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Matthew 22:34-46
Love In Action

Back in April, when we were all
staying home and staying safe,
someone in Ripton started hanging painted pieces of wood
on shrubs and trees along the roads.

“We can do this together,” one said.

“We can do this hard thing,” proclaimed another.

Those simple pieces of wood offered a badly needed reminder
that there was a “we” that bound us all together,
even as we were apart, marooned in our own homes.

Down in Middlebury, around the same time,
Lilly Devlin, who lives in Cornwall,
started painting wooden hearts
and leaving them around the county,
outside homes, businesses, churches.

In an interview in the Addison Independent
she offered the hope that “They will be a reminder,”

that we need one another to make it through tough times
and love is the best way to make it through.”

Similar things were happening all over Vermont.

Bakers gave away bread.

Distilleries shifted from making gin to making hand sanitizer.

School buses delivered food.

Congregations worshipped from home.

In a thousand different ways,
and sometimes at great personal cost,
we prioritized the “we” over the “I.”

In other words, we loved our neighbors.

And the pandemic, in its early days, brought out
a need to make visible that love of neighbor
that maybe we’d forgotten we needed.

That was true globally, too.

In late March, the Belfast COVID response team released a video of empty streets.

The narration invited us to see deeper than the emptiness.

“When you go out and see the empty streets, the empty stadiums, the empty train platforms, don’t say to yourself, ‘It looks like the end of the world.’

What you’re seeing is love in action.

What you’re seeing in that negative space, is how much we do care for each other, for our grandparents, our parents, our brothers and sisters, for people we will never meet.”

Love in action.

Love in action is the kind of love
that Jesus is talking about in today's Gospel lesson.

Our passage begins with Jesus being asked
which commandment in the law is the greatest.

There's no contest, really.

Then, as now, daily Jewish prayers
begin with a prayer called the Shema.

The Hebrew word, shema, means "hear."

It's the first word in the passage in Deuteronomy
that Jesus quotes in his answer.

"Hear, O Israel, the Lord is our God, the Lord alone.

You shall love the Lord your God

with all your heart, and with all your soul,

and with all your might."

Love God.

That's the first and greatest commandment.

It's the one from which all else flows.

Jesus *could* have stopped there.

And maybe the Pharisees would have been mollified.

But he doesn't.

Because Jesus has more to say on the subject of love.

There's another one, he adds.

Like the first, but different.

And it goes like this.

Love your neighbor, too.

Love them as you love yourself.

Loving your neighbor as yourself

is also rooted deeply in the Torah:
in the holiness code of the book of Leviticus,
which you heard a reading from earlier.

The holiness code teaches us
how to live as God intended us to live.

How to live in a way that mirrors
the holiness of God.

Loving your neighbor as yourself
is part and parcel of living a holy life.

Loving your neighbor as yourself,
Jesus asserts, is part and parcel
of loving *God*.

Binding together love of God and love of neighbor,
he asserts their inseparability.

We cannot claim to love God
if we are not loving our neighbors.

And we can't love our neighbors
without loving God.

It takes some work for us to hear those words
as the revolutionary statement that they are.

Here in 2020, the word love
has been diluted by Hallmark sensibilities.

We equate it with romance.
We confuse it with like.

In Jesus's hands, love is a radical act.
His words – his insistence
on the inseparability of love of God and love of neighbor,
on their shared, foundational importance,
would have been heard as a revolutionary challenge

to a status quo that had grown comfortable with injustice,
and which seemed more intent
on restricting neighborly love than encouraging it.

And Jesus's words ring across the millennia
and challenge *this* status quo, too.

Love God.

Love our neighbors as ourselves.

We are called, as Christians,
to hear these words not as platitudes
but as a radical challenge to reorient our lives,
one that asks much of us
and offers much to us.

I hear this passage challenging us
to do three things.

First: this text insists
that we treat love as an ‘all-in’ proposition.

Love God
with *all* your heart
and with *all* your soul
and with *all* your mind.

In Hebrew, the word that we translate as soul
means something far more comprehensive.

The word is ‘nephesh:’ it’s the life force
that God breathed into us – it’s our very being.

So, love God
with *all* your heart,
with *all* your being,
with *all* your mind.

All.

In other words, loving God
and loving our neighbors is not to be treated
as one thing among many on our to-do list.

It's the foundation of who we are.

Love is what we were made for,
because we were made in the image of God.

David Bartlett was a YDS professor
and a brilliant theologian & preacher.

He said this in a sermon he preached in 2012.

Love is from God.

Love is the very heart of what makes God, God.

*It is not just that God does lots of wonderful things
and then adds on love as kind of bonus.*

*Ours is not the God who creates, judges, redeems
and then, oh yes, I almost forgot, the God who loves.*

*The God we serve is the God who is above all
the lover of this world and the lover of our souls.*

*The God we worship is the God who creates out of love,
and judges because of love, and redeems through love
and one day will bring the whole creation to its glorious fulfillment
which will look exactly like – love.*

We are made in God's image
and God's image is *love*.

If love is the very heart of what makes God, God.
then love is the very heart of what makes us, us.

That's what the *all* in this text is telling us:
to weave love
into everything we do.

To love our neighbors
everywhere we go:
the grocery checkout line,
the post office,
sitting in traffic,
at home,
at work.

Love.

—

That's the first challenge:
stop making love an add-on.

Treat it as the essence of who we are.

Because it is.

—

The second challenge in Jesus' words
is for us to realize that we cannot love God

without loving all that God loves.

And friends, God loves all of it.

All of us.

Each of us.

All of creation.

No exceptions,

no conditions,

no limits,

no bounds.

There are no qualifiers in Jesus' words

or those in Leviticus.

This will not be easy for us.

We are so accustomed,

to putting boundaries around love,
to thinking of it as something we *earn*.

A limited resource to be doled out in small doses
to those who deserve it.

Jesus places no such conditions.

It's not "love your neighbors
except when they annoy you."

It's not "love your neighbors
as long as they're voting for the same people you are."

It's love your neighbor as yourself.

Full stop.

That's hard.

But Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King offers
a bit of advice on how we might do that
in a sermon he wrote
on Jesus' command to love our enemies.

*Within the best of us, King says, there is some evil,
and within the worst of us, there is some good.*

When we come to see this, we take a different attitude toward individuals.

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*And when you come to the point, he says,
that you look in the face of every man
and see deep down within him
what religion calls "the image of God,"
you begin to love him in spite of.*

No matter what he does, you see God's image there.

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*Love is greater than like.
Love is understanding, redemptive goodwill for all men,
so that you love everybody,
because God loves them.*

These are not abstract ideas.

They're not idle words.

Martin Luther King Jr had stared into the face of hate.

Jesus had stared into the face of hate.

And they were equally uncompromising,
in spite of what they knew humans were capable of.

Love everybody.

Because God loves them and we love God.

Because all of us are made in the image of God.

Imagine how much more gentle
we would be with one another if we looked deep
and recognized in each other the image of God.

If we reclaim love as the thing that makes us, us,

if we learn to see the image of God all around us,
we are led, inevitably,
to the third thing that Jesus' words
challenge us to do.

Put love in action.

Love is lived out *in our concrete behaviors*.

The text from Leviticus spells out exactly what that means.

It means to feed the hungry who are our neighbors,
to care for the poor and the marginalized who are our neighbors,
to not steal from our neighbors,
to not lie to or defraud our neighbors,
to be *just* and fair to our neighbors,
to not profit from the blood of our neighbors.

It even means to reprove
our neighbors when they go astray,
becomes sometimes telling hard truths to someone
is exactly what love looks like.

What Leviticus is describing,
what Jesus is calling on us to see,
is that love binds us up into a web
of mutual responsibility.

God who loves each of us has woven us together,
a fabric of neighborliness,
each of us bound, one to the other and all to God.
Bound by ties of love.

In calling us to love God and our neighbor,
Jesus calls us to tend to those threads
that bind us together, that keep us whole,
to strengthen them where they are fraying,

to mend them where they have torn.

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And oh, how they are torn.

We need Jesus' words right about now.

We need Jesus' *help*.

Last Saturday, the New York Times

ran a piece on pandemic fatigue.

“ the rituals of hope and unity
that helped people endure the first surge
of the virus have given way,”
the piece reports, “to exhaustion and frustration.”

I doubt that comes as a surprise to anyone.

Those stories of love from last April

feel far away, quaint, really.

It's been a long, hard road since then.

And here's Jesus, telling us
to love God and to love our neighbors as ourselves.

And maybe I'm not the only one who's first reaction
to hearing this passage was to wonder
how on earth we're supposed to do that
when our cups are so very empty.

That's where this text, friends,
offers us good news.

Love isn't something
we have to fashion ourselves,
mining deep in our exhausted hearts.

Love is from God.

Love is from God.

From God who is love.

Jesus's words are a challenge, yes.

And they are also an invitation.

To let God's love fill us.

And then to open the spigot of our hearts

and let that love flow on through us,

out into a world ...

full of everything God loves.

Love with our whole beings.

Love all that God loves,

which is all of us,

which is everything.

Act that love out

in all of the moments of our days.

Act as if love

were the most important thing.

Because it is.

Amen.