

Complex Simplicity

October 18, 2020

Purpose: To declare the great commandment, calling again for the love of the neighbor

Message: In the great commandment of loving the neighbor, we are called into the lifestyle of Christ who lays aside all power structure, calling us the priority of God instead.

Scripture: Matthew 22:34-46 (I will read), *Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18 PLEASE READ*

Synopsis: When it comes down to it, faith and following Christ is pretty simple. Love God with heart soul and mind, and your neighbor as yourself. Yet we know that these two commandments set us into a scenario of infinite complexity, always asking “who is my neighbor”. What Jesus asks us to do here is to lay down the categories of power that would divide by the slots we so often use and call us into God’s way of seeing all people as children of his care.

(Mat 22:34-46 NIV) ⁴ Hearing that Jesus had silenced the Sadducees, the Pharisees got together.

³⁵ One of them, an expert in the law, tested him with this question:

³⁶ "Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?"

³⁷ Jesus replied: "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." ¹

³⁸ This is the first and greatest commandment.

³⁹ And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'¹

⁴⁰ All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

⁴¹ While the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them,

⁴² "What do you think about the Messiah? Whose son is he?" "The son of David," they replied.

⁴³ He said to them, "How is it then that David, speaking by the Spirit, calls him 'Lord'? For he says,

⁴⁴ "'The Lord said to my Lord: 'Sit at my right hand until I put your enemies under your feet.'" ¹

⁴⁵ If then David calls him 'Lord,' how can he be his son?"

⁴⁶ No one could say a word in reply, and from that day on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

Psalm 110—quotation down below

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It all seems simple enough. Nic., short to the point. Love God. Love your neighbor. Got it. Thanks Jesus. I appreciate the tip. If I do that, then everything is cool, me and God wise. We can look forward this whole Kingdom of God thing you keep talking about. What is that? What does it mean to Love with your whole being? Well, I don't know, think about the one what you love, do things that they like, show up for their birthday. Loving God? Sure, that is just not taking the Lord's name in vein, praying before meals, telling God how great we all think that God is. We sing songs about God—if that is not love, what is. So long as I do not need to clap—singing is one thing; clapping just makes me feel so Pentecostal and stuff. So yeah, I think I get the whole love God stuff. Love your neighbor as yourself. Well, that is pretty easy too. Those who are like me, who live around me, who I run into in the store, who I am comfortable with—they are my neighbors. So I am nice to them—what goes around comes around after all. I might need them some time in any case. Bigger? Bigger, right. Well maybe I need to wrap my head around some of the people who I don't like, who didn't treat me nicely at school, who doesn't share my world view or cut me off in traffic. Bigger? OK Jesus, you mean like those people around the world who I don't understand and whose values are not like mine—I suppose so. I mean diversity is in right now, so you want me to know a broader set of friends, those who eat different things and all that. Again, with the bigger. Right. You mean the ones that I really don't like, and who really don't like me. You are going to your whole enemy thing again, aren't you? Not that that really ever made a whole lot of sense. But yeah, I guess I don't *have to* hate them. Bigger still? Love them? Them. Those people. The other. Love them. Surely you can't be serious... You are? ... and don't call you Shirley... right.

As familiar as these words tend to be, they certainly are complicated. Their weight and their import is word for word impressive and do an awfully good job of getting to the nub of everything. Love God. Love your neighbor. But from this bloom a whole web of interpretation, debate and consideration of what to do with it all. Like those Russian nesting dolls that reveal one after the next after the next, it all gets a good deal foggier even from here. Toss in the real-world political intrigue going on in the midst of all of this and it can be something that is hard to understand.

There is no getting around the fact that this is a trap—one of several we find in these concluding acts of Matthew's telling of the life and times of Jesus. Answer too narrowly and you risk leaving something out. Answer too broadly and you get accused of not adhering to the basic insistences of the law. By identifying the greatest commandments, Jesus is speaking not to eliminate all the rest of the commandments as commentary. He is identifying the core root of the

whole of the tradition. He is setting up the lens through which we are invited to read everything after that. And when I say everything, I mean everything. The Bible, our world, our lives—the whole of human experience. What is being offered as an answer to a seemingly simple question is not just more rules to live by; a greater law for us to follow and enforce. It far more than that. What Jesus is giving here, instead, is a way of viewing the world through the lens of what is at the core of what it means to live the life of faith. He is saying that the point of the law, the commandments, is not the law itself. It is the way of life that these practices produce, the way of reading how the world is that leads how it should be. We follow God in love and in following we are invariably drawn into the challenging task of loving our neighbors along the way. And it has a lot to do with what we as disciples are willing to risk.

Risk is not a word that we do much with in church. Church is actually one of the most risk adverse institutions we have. We have made the purpose of religion is to save us from needing to risk at all, saying that Jesus has taken the risk on our behalf. Faith is more about mitigating the risk of eventual judgement rather than trying to do anything that we might find odd or uncomfortable. We have tried to tame God to suit our aversion to the natural risks of faithful following, shaping the divine more around our aversion to challenge than around the holiness of some else.

We don't like it that being human makes us vulnerable. One of our greatest wishes is that being in relationship meant that we would not get hurt. We want the hallmarks of community and comradery without the contextualization of self-interest such a community requires. Right now we are at the wonderfully messy stage of convincing Luke and Anna that "Because I want to" is not, of itself, a suitable reason for anything. Taming the raw personal priority, which now and again I just have to admire when it is not throwing a tantrum, is a basic part of being in relationship any relationship. Including that of faith. We would rather settle for the passivism of the pews, for the pleasant and safe than to risk getting tangled up out there in the messiness of the world. Everything that law is about is about preventing risk and accounting for sin—whose is in and who is out, who did what and when. That we can manage. In this we can stay safe. In this we do not need to confront the unmanageable risks faith.

But Jesus will not leave us alone to live in the safety of the law. Like all the prophets before him, he points not toward what to do, but who we should be as the way of explaining the will of YHWH God. When we hear commandments, we think of law and order, chiseled in stone when all the time what God has in mind is hearts and minds willing to risk much. Because God is a God of risk. You might wonder what sort of risks God would take. I mean being God

and all, the odds are somewhat stacked in God's favor. God created us, God breathed life into us. You would think God has things basically in hand. But God turns around and gives us freedom, a soul and a spark to think for ourselves. In doing so, God risks rejection of the way God has set out for us, and from the very first that is exactly what we do. But time and again God keeps coming back and risking relationship with people. Even when God gives up and storms off and floods the place, he comes back and starts over again, even rebuking his own behavior by promising never to do something like that again. Over and over again, God risks, and never more so than when God comes in the form of humanity to embrace once and for all.

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And then God invites us to do the same. To risk following along. To model our lives after the one who leads us forth. We are invited into faith not to salve the eventual fears of what could be—that's a nice side benefit in the end. Rather we are invited to be like Christ and to risk the ways and the awkwardness of the World, knowing that it is a risk in doing so. Let us not forget that these questions are meant to put Jesus to death—it doesn't get a whole lot riskier than that. At the end of the day, being a disciple—one who comes after—means risking with Christ.

Faith is a risky business, after all. You need to take the intellectual risk of saying that there is something out there beyond our definitions that cares about us and loves us. You need to take the risk of identity that would ask us to bring ourselves into relationship with that God that asks us to become more than what we are now and grow into something new. Then, most demanding of all, we are asked to risk like God risks and enter relationship time and again with those who we would call our neighbor, knowing all the time that the deep down answer to the

age old question of “who is my neighbor” will always take us to that level of humanity we would rather not call human, let alone neighbor. God engages our world of freedoms, including abused freedoms, and comes in anyway. Unstopped by this messy, painful world, God makes a way for us to dare to risk loving. Embracing that risk is meant to be one of the hallmarks of God’s people: “by this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another”.

This is utterly complex, even in the simplest of sayings that we know so well. That said, we cannot be so baffled by the myriad things that this can mean that we never get on with “what are you willing to do” and how might it change our lives. We are called to be people of faith in that we do, all that we are, in the field, in the store, in the way we are with each other. We are called to do so because God so loves the world, that he keeps giving not only his son, but of himself in love to heal it even now.

I want to leave you with this. In this simple call of love of God and love of neighbor, I wonder what might your next step be? Where are you being invited into risk? It needn’t be hard—it could be just risking explaining that you are who you are for a reason, and that reason is Jesus Christ. It might be risking allowing church to become less about where we gather when we have it all figured out, but rather where we can say “I’m not sure” and “I don’t know” safely together? And all of this is but a start.

There is much more here. There is much more to say and even more to do. Love God. Love your neighbor. Risk loving come what may.