

Proper 25A – “Love”
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This is one of those gospel lessons that I just want to say “Amen” to and sit back down. It’s one of those passages that is so obvious and so important, I’m tempted to say, “What he said,” (he being Jesus) and sit back down. “What is the most important commandment?” the Pharisees asked him. And it’s meant to be a trick question and since they came to Jesus after hearing that the Sadducees failed to get him, it’s not only a trick question it’s a competitive question. The legal experts are trying to out-law the other legal experts in the name of good faith. So they’ve pulled out the big guns with this one. But it’s hard for me to see anything very tricky about this. Just think about the simple thing they were asking: “What is the most important thing we can do?” they said. In other words, “When it comes right down to it (if it comes right down to it) out of the 613 commandments in the Torah (that’s how many there were – 248 do’s and 365 don’ts) – out of all of them which of them is the most important?” Now maybe they thought it was tricky because there were so many to choose from or maybe they wanted to trap Jesus into saying that some of the laws weren’t really that important at all. But come on – if they had been watching this guy at all they should have been able to predict his response.

Because all along the road Jesus had been answering this question. He was incredibly clear all along the way on what his priority was. He had healed on the Sabbath, breaking the law about the Sabbath in order to *love* those who longed for wholeness. He had touched a child who had died, breaking a law regarding purity, in order to give life to the little girl and to *love* the grieving father. Jesus had eaten with sinners and tax collectors and shared meals with an endless list of those who would have been classified as “unclean”, breaking table laws in order to show *love* to those on the margins. When he met an unknown Samaritan woman at the well, Jesus didn’t turn away, he talked to her and received water from her and in doing so broke several laws regarding interaction across genders and cultures and beliefs in order to *love* the woman and encourage her mission and ministry. On Jesus’ journey whenever it came down to a clash of commandments, there was a very clear winner. Two laws trumped all the others, time after time after time. And those were the commandments to love God with all of you’ve got and to love your neighbor as yourself.

So, if they had been watching Jesus, really watching him they would have known that his ministry, his life were answers to their question. The choices he made, the

example he set, the priorities he established, the people he gathered with and healed and fed – all of it had to do with love. Even when loving meant asking another commandment to take a break, to bow out for awhile and let love win.

And so it should be that way for us too. Obvious right? All along the various roads we travel -- love should be the answer to the question about what is most important to us as people of faith. And it shouldn't only be the answer we verbalize whenever someone asks, but this should be the kind of answer that is obvious to others simply by watching how we live, how we act, how we are with each other; it should be obvious by watching the choices we make and the priorities we set as individuals and as a community too that love is important most of all. They should know by watching us at the table and down by the wells of our lives and by the ways we embrace all those who want to be healed and whole. They'll know we are Christians by our love, right?

The kicker is knowing what that means and one of the challenges is that in some ways the game hasn't changed all that much. One of the things that saddens me and frustrates me is that often it's the "officially religious" who tend to make this whole thing more complicated than maybe it needs to be. It still feels like "love" shouldn't be that hard but like with the Pharisees and the Sadducees in the gospel, it tends to be "voices of faith" doing one of two things: either saying that all religious laws are equally important (this would be the "we read this all literally" camp) or so narrowly defining "loving God and neighbor" that the breadth of what God has given us gets ignored or categorized as unworthy or unclean. And we end up arguing over what love means rather than doing love in the world. In some ways even two thousand years later we are still trying to out-law each other.

But in this gospel there is another way and the good news is that that way can be our way, because it's faithful too. It's the way that offers oneself for the sake of being love, of giving love, of sharing and breaking open opportunities for love. It is the way of offering oneself to the cause of love and the potential for love and the healing that love brings. It is to receive and embody love of God and neighbor in a way that both fulfills the law and trumps every little piece of it all at the same time.

There is actually a bumper sticker that I think started at Mars Hill that says "Love wins." Not a bad motto, really. Definitely a proclamation of faith and not a bad 2-word summary of the entire gospel message. We can be a faithful people by holding two commandments in front of us at all times, by never letting go and allowing those commandments to shape us and guide us and grow us and challenge us and break us and heal us. And the do's and don't's that matter will follow and

there will likely be at least 613 of them. The key will be that they'll know when to stand up to represent "the greatest" and they'll know when to bow down and let "the greatest" lead. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. And love your neighbor as yourself." May we be given the strength and the humility it takes to let love be our way in the church and in the world.