

Sermon 20.10.25

Leviticus 19:17-18

You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. ¹⁸You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord.

Matt 22: 34-40

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. 'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbour as yourself." On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

SERMON:

BEGIN WITH RECITING SHEMA in Hebrew.

Repeat in English: Listen, Israel. The Lord our God, the LORD is one.

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength. (Deut. 6:4-5)

Shema - Listen:

Here we are again, in our scripture today, Jesus is drawn into an argument with the learned of his community. This is how the educated engaged - with questions and lively discussion. He's asked: 'What then, is the most important commandment?'

Jesus answers with the traditional answer. The Shema, of course. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6, this prayer known as the Shema - Shema meaning, listen. The Shema is the first prayer a Jewish child learned. It was said first thing in the morning and at bed at night. It is to be inscribed on the doorposts of the home and worn on the forehead. It was, and continues to be the center of the Jewish faith. Even today, to die with the Shema being the last thing uttered, is the aim of Jewish persons of faith.

Jesus pairs this most well known prayer - the center of their faith, with a line from Leviticus 19, a portion of the Law known as the holiness code. These laws would have also been well known to Jesus' listeners. They are instructions given to all Israel about how to maintain holiness in the community. Holiness was not about needing to "earn" personal salvation (a concept foreign to ancient Israel) but was an attribute of God, in fact, *the* attribute of God. And in order for this holy God to dwell in the midst of an unholy people, a certain order needed to be maintained...and so they have this long list of laws to obey as a way for unruly folks to be able to dwell in God's holiness. In the holiness code in Leviticus there is no distinction between what we might call "religious" concerns and "secular" concerns. All of life matters to God -- what we eat, how we do business, who we sleep with, how we care for the land, our relationships with family, neighbors, and strangers -- all of it matters to God...sounds like last week's sermon, doesn't it?

In our text today, Jesus pairs these two texts - naming the love of God - the vertical connection between humans and God, and the call to love our neighbor - the horizontal connection of person to person (use image of cross) as what's at the center of faith.

And pairing these calls to love, His is an **invitation to a counter-cultural way of living**. Not hating your neighbor, but instead treating your neighbor fairly - that was, and IS, counter-cultural. It goes against the way of the empire. In our passage today, Jesus is bringing his listeners back to the ancient texts that were God's commands. This God who brought the oppressed out of bondage. These laws were a way to freedom. To care for the other is truly dangerous to the way of the empire.

The vertical and horizontal axis of our faith that Jesus names - loving God and loving neighbor, support one another. They cannot authentically stand alone.

Jesus commands his listeners to focus on the heart, the center of their faith. All else depends on this.

So, what does this mean for us, to love God and our neighbor? - This heart of Jesus' message, from which all other teachings come.

How do we know where and how to focus our lives - how do we stay focused on the center of the meeting of the vertical and horizontal axis of faith? How do we aim for that place where these axis' meet?

I want to show you a video clip of what one person has to say about aiming for the center.

(SHOW VIDEO of Aiming for the center, start at 48 seconds and go until about 4:50)¹

“Aim for the center” - we are called to stay focused on what’s at the heart of Jesus’ message.

This is no easy task. It takes practice, returning our aim again and again to the heart of Jesus’ message - to love God and those that are not necessarily easy for us to love. This is counter-cultural work. It goes against the work of the empire.

We have work to do, my friends.

Jesus' example of Loving God means caring for and about those that are not easily seen, those on the margins. He was teaching a new way of loving God, one that the religious leaders of his time fought against. Jesus was counter cultural.

Loving God and neighbor may mean taking a stand against religious leaders who ignore, and sometimes actively harm the least among us.

¹ [WORLD'S MOST AMAZING ARCHER in Slow Motion - Smarter Every Day 130](#)

In his October 1 letter to his 800,000 followers, James Dobson wrote:

“Now we are approaching another presidential election that carries enormous implications for the stability of our democratic system of government...If we abandon our founding core values, the world will suffer for it. The binary choice before us is that stark.”

The letter goes on, agreeing with sentiments penned by one of his followers *“I’m voting for the Second Amendment. I’m voting for the next Supreme Court justice. I’m voting for the electoral college. I’m voting for the police and law and order... I’m voting for good and against evil. I’m not just voting for one person.”*²

Note what’s missing in this litany of what really matters to him. Dobson doesn’t say he’s voting for those in prison, those who are hungry, those who simply desire to be seen and treated as equal citizens of our country.

Jesus’ words are meant to disrupt our ‘Empire attitude’

They are meant to shake us up so that we live life differently - seeking first the kingdom of God, not the kingdom of the empire. I believe that Dobson’s letter misses the center. It focuses more on the empire than shaking up the empire and bringing the marginalized into the center.

² <https://www.drjamesdobson.org/newsletters/october-newsletter-2020>

How can we hone our skills so that we keep our focus aimed on the center?

Jesus says love God - vertical axis,

And love neighbor, horizontal axis

Aim for the center.

To take aim means action - both outer action and inner action.

Outer action can take so many different forms. Where is your passion for justice?

Environmental justice, racial justice, feeding the poor, visiting the sick and imprisoned, working on campaigns that promote Jesus' call to love. Jesus' talk of empire disruption requires outer action.

Aiming for the center also requires Inner action - some internal way of practicing, coming back to the center again and again when we miss the mark.

Inner action might involve paying attention to where our thoughts and small daily habits are aimed.

It might be practicing a discipline like the Shema - praying prayers that are written on our hearts as a way of remembering, whether it's morning and evening, or 5

times a day, as our Muslim brothers and sisters do, or 7 times like the Benedictine monks.

What are daily practices that you do? CAN BE SHORT

Maybe stopping and giving thanks, or simply noticing this breath

Inner action can look different at different times in our life, but inner action needs to be coupled with outer action.

How are you aiming at the center, Where love for God and love for neighbor meet?