

October 29, 2023

SERMON RECAP –

The sermon itself was pretty simple. We took time to celebrate the vision of Oak Table and how much dignity the mission builds in people.

And at the same time, we introduced a new sermon series.

Below, you have that intro followed by my interpretation of the scripture passage for the day.

Dear Friends,

For the next weeks until Advent, we are embarking on a sermon series devoted to the timeless values of Gratitude – Forgiveness – Altruism. These are simply modern words to describe the foundational teaching of Jesus that, before all else, we are called to love God with all our mind, heart, soul, and strength. And then we are called to care for our neighbour with the same love that we would aspire to care for our selves.

I pray that these services and the experiences they create touch you deeply, perhaps surprise you even. And I pray that you are reminded that you are not alone and that the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts. Each person matters when we make sure that everyone matters.

Be blessed. Be a blessing.

Rev Eric

Today's passage is one of the best known in the Bible. Jesus will talk to us about the **greatest commandment** - The one where we are called to love God with all our mind, heart, soul, and strength. And then he will add a second commandment which is an add-on to the first - where we are called to love our neighbour as ourselves. So, the two commandments when they work in tandem act as one teaching: You can't really love you neighbour as yourself without loving God. And you can't really say you love God if you are not loving towards your neighbour.

The passage comes at a moment of high drama. It is one where the Pharisees are trying one last time to trip Jesus up. They are trying to fence him in, so they can then fence him out. And then, eventually, they follow through with doing away with him.

To prevent having his message be trapped, Jesus will elevate his message and his very presence into the history and the destiny of the nation of Israel.

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There are many ways to interpret how literally he is being when he does this. Rev Eric will share a progressive understanding of what Jesus may have meant. And by progressive, he means building bridges through mutual understanding of how differences complement our understanding of the truth, rather than seeing differences as reasons for division.

When you pause and think about it all, how very sad it truly is. Sad because it is senseless.

For us to understand how this works, we will note a couple of things.

Number 1. The word Israel means God liberates, or God fights for, or God defends. In this case, we would add that Isarel contains the name EL – which is how the Northern part of the country would traditionally refer to God. Generally speaking, there was a greater appreciation for cultural diversity in the northern part of Israel than in the south.

Number 2. The mythology of the king David is born of his ability to defeat the Philistine Goliath. David did this from meager and yet wise and skillful means. The message here is to never neglect the voice of another person, the gifts of another person, the needs of another person. To do so, Jesus reminds us, is a sin.

Number 3. Jesus will simplify the law to trap the Pharisees themselves in their own hypocrisy. In other words, as they are trying to trap him in the useless debate to decide is the best one, Jesus returns us to the simplicity considering the spirit of the law before worrying about the letter of the law. In other words, while rules and structure are definitely needed, when we take time to heed this teaching first, we may find that we need a whole lot fewer rules to govern us and we can get on with the business of living a whole lot faster.

As we read our passage, Reverend Eric adds the following interpretation:

There are some who believe that by reducing the laws in this passage, Jesus has done away with the law altogether. If we narrow our focus so much that we lose sight of the presence of others around us, we run the risk of saying that “As long as I feel like I love God, then I am justified in doing what I think is right.” There is a vast difference between what is simple and what is simplistic.

Making things simple is to break things down to manageable parts. Essentially Jesus is saying, “Before you worry about the finer points of all the different laws, get this foundational teaching down first. The rest will still require your effort, faith, and integrity. And with this in place, things will go much better. By God’s grace, the whole is always greater than the sum of its parts.”

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In simplifying things, Jesus confronts the Pharisees with their own hypocrisy. They are making things simplistic – Choose one law they say – as if one rule were better than another without considering the wider picture. The hypocrisy of the Pharisees is to pretend that they are compassionate leaders when in fact they are avoiding the imperative to care for each other.

What is simple leaves no room for bypassing, avoidance, or self-delusion. Because what is simple is easily understandable. What is in our character will rise very quickly. What is simplistic will in fact do the opposite. It will mask core sources of conflict and poorly adapted behaviors – sometimes until things are beyond repair. The Good News, however, is that by faith, nothing is ever beyond repair – and that is perhaps the greatest power of the greatest commandment.

Here now is our passage, taken from the book of Matthew, chapter 22, verses 34 to 46:

The Greatest Commandment

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, 35 and one of them, an expert in the law, 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. 39 And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets.”

Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question: “What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son, is he?” They said to him, “The son of David.” He said to them, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying,

‘The Lord said to my Lord,

“Sit at my right hand,

until I put your enemies under your feet”?”

“If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?” No one was able to give him an answer, nor from that day did anyone dare to ask him any more questions.