

The greatest of these is love

Deut. 34:1-12, Ps. 90:1-17, 1 Thes. 2:1-8,
Matthew 22:34-40

The Rev. Dr. L. Gregory Bloomquist

St. George's Anglican Church, Ottawa ON

October 26, 2008 (Pentecost 24)

³⁴ *But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they came together.* ³⁵ *And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question, to test him.* ³⁶ *"Teacher, which is the great commandment in the law?"* ³⁷ *And 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.*

³⁸ *This is the great and first commandment.* ³⁹ *And a second is like it, You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

⁴⁰ *On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets."*

This morning I want to talk about something that has been on many of our minds recently. Well, actually, it's been on our minds for a long time. In fact, I think that it's been there from the beginning. I want to talk about "love". And no, I am not going to sing, so don't worry.

But, it's an opportune moment to talk about love, especially when many young couples have just heard Paul's words read to them this summer: "... and the greatest of these is love".

It's also an opportune moment when those of us who have sought to maintain our fidelity to the revealed Word of God, Jesus Christ, as made known to us in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments are accused of being un-loving and even of breaking apart the body of Christ through our lack of love.

So, let's talk about love.

As we seek to understand the Gospel this morning, let's just take a moment to review. As any good student knows, you can only keep learning if you also spend some time reviewing what you are supposed to have learned thus far.

Since just before last Christmas, you and I have been reading about and hearing explained to us stories about Jesus from the Gospel of Matthew. We're now coming to the end of Matthew's Gospel, and we know where it's going. But, it's important to remember where today's story fits both as we look backwards to what we have seen and forwards to what we are going to see as we finish up reading Matthew in November.

What we have seen over these months has been that Jesus is warmly, even desperately embraced by common people with all sorts of afflictions, problems, heartaches, and needs.

And we have also seen that he is hotly, even violently, rejected by the institutional and territorial religious leaders who see him either as a heretic, or a schismatic, or as a threat to their power or, as a certain US vice-presidential candidate likes to say: all of the above. You remember how time and again they have tried to trap him and trick him, even getting him into trouble with the Romans, as we saw last week when the Pharisees asked him whether paying taxes was legitimate or not.

Why was Jesus such a threat to the Pharisees? There are probably many reasons: hurt pride, personal affront. But the main reason was because Jesus made it look as if keeping the Law were not essential. The Pharisees

taught that keeping the whole law was essential in order for God to send His Messiah to free Israel once and for all from Gentile domination. Jesus jeopardized that. He ate and drank with outcasts and sinners. He touched the unclean and the dead, and healed them, even bringing the dead back to life. He spoke of a higher law than the Law of Moses, and even made himself into the new law giver: you have heard it said ... but I say unto you...

Jesus jeopardized the future of Israel and so they plotted to get rid of him before he could ruin their work. Look at verse 34, a phrase that Matthew repeats in verse 41. It's a little phrase, but it's telling. For the only way that these words are ever used throughout Scripture is to indicate a hostile gathering. Think for example of the way the words are used in Ps 2.2: *"Why do the nations conspire, and the peoples plot in vain? ² The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD and his anointed"*.

The Pharisees do not respect Jesus for having dispatched the Sadducees. They hate him for jeopardizing their plans for Israel in a way that the Sadducees never did. And so they have come together to rid themselves of the Lord's anointed.

They do so, as they have done in the past, by trying to humiliate him publicly. They come to him with a test.

The test that they propose is not what you and I normally understand by "test". When we think of "test" we normally think either of a scientific or medical test to see what is going on in a test-tube or a body, or we think of test in an academic context as a means of determining what someone knows.

The word "test" here is the same word that is used by Matthew earlier in the Gospel to describe what Satan does with Jesus at the end of the 40 days in the wilderness: he tested him, or tempted him. Satan sought to trap Jesus, to get him to turn his back on God. That is what the Pharisees are now going to try to do.

And here's how they proposed to do it. In the Law of Moses there are 613 commandments, given by God to Moses. These are all commandments given by God so none can be removed, and none added unless God does. You must follow all the commandments to please God and if you fail in fulfilling any of these commandments, you can only expect enmity with God. So far so good?

But as the Pharisees themselves had been asked: are all the commandments of the Law of equal value? I mean: if I happen to get a drop of bacon fat on my bread, that's not like killing a person, is it?

So, even as Satan had done in the wilderness when Jesus was hungry -- "come on, you're hungry and you've got the power; turn the stone to bread!" -- a representative of the Pharisees tests to Jesus with a question (verse 36): "Teacher, [what do you think]: which is the great commandment?" In other words, which is the commandment that I must obey, and as a corollary, which ones can I safely ignore, or put on hold, or at least find a way around?

Do you see the diabolical trap? If Jesus says that there is one commandment greater than another, then some of the commandments are less important. If Jesus says this, the Pharisees will be able to show that Jesus may think that God has given all the laws but that not all of these God-given laws have to be obeyed, because some of them are more important than others. Jesus will then indeed be seen to be making himself into a new law-giver, making void the laws of God once given by God to Moses and creating new laws of his own along the way.

The Pharisees wait, expecting that Jesus has no way out of this trap.

Jesus' response has become very well known. In fact, in Anglican tradition we are perhaps more familiar with it than many Christians since we use it at the beginning of our Communion service.

Jesus answered the Pharisee with two verses from the Law of Moses. The first and the great commandment (vss 37-38) is from Deuteronomy: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your

soul, and with all your mind. The second, Jesus says (in vs 39), is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.

Jesus' response is remarkable. Why? Because rather than picking any single law that will render all the other laws inferior, Jesus actually chooses two verses from which every other law can be seen to derive. Not having graven images, not taking the Lord's name in vain, honoring the Lord's day... and all laws like them are all derivable from the commandment that says Love the Lord your God with all that you are. And not murdering, or robbing, or coveting against, or lying about... and all laws like them are all derivable from the commandment that says Love your neighbour as yourself.¹ The 613 laws are found -- like little Russian dolls -- contained within the first and great law, and by analogy in the second.

But, as that great theologian Tina Turner asked: But, "What's love got to do with it?"

Or to put it in our own terms: Why does Jesus choose as the greatest laws of God ones connected to love? After all, you can command someone not to eat pork or to say that if you murder someone, you are guilty of a crime. But, can you command anyone to love something or someone? How many young men or women have said in their hearts concerning the person that they care about: "Love me". Did it work?

Well, let's ask what both Jesus and the Pharisees knew was meant by these two commandments, to love God and to love your neighbour.

First, love God.

Love, as it is used in the commandment from Deuteronomy -- Love the Lord your God with your whole heart, soul, mind and strength -- is not some warm feeling, or some emotional fervour. In Deuteronomy, love "can be commanded" because it "must be expressed in loyalty, in service, and in unqualified obedience to the demands of the Law. For to love God is, in answer to a unique claim (6,4), to be loyal to him (11,1.22; 30,20), to walk in his ways (10,12; 11,22; 19,9; 30,16), to keep his commandments (10,12; 11,1.22; 19,9), to do them (11,22; 19,9), to heed them or his voice (11,13; 30,16), to serve him (10,12; 11,1.13). It is, in brief, a love defined by and pledged in the covenant—a covenantal love."²

¹ Furthermore, these two laws fulfill the requirements of the Pharisaic rules of interpretation of the day, given by Rabbi Hillel. The rabbis, among whom the Pharisees were the main party, had rules of interpretation of the OT. One of these rabbis, probably the most important rabbi to the Pharisees, was Hillel, who had come up with a way to understand the OT. He came up with 7 rules for interpreting all of the OT. Without going into detail as to what these rules are, suffice it to say that what Jesus does is to answer the lawyer's question concerning which of the 613 commandments given to Moses is the most important, and by default which ones are less important, by using all 7 of Hillel's rules to come up with an answer: there is one that is most important, and there is another that is important by analogy, and all the rest are found within these two. He chooses one verse, and an analogous verse, that do not exclude any laws but rather explain why those laws are laws and also how the other laws are to be fulfilled.

² William L. Moran, "Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (Ja 1963): 78 According to Moran, "love" language belongs to the ANE background of international relations: "When we come to the Amarna period we no longer need hesitate, for then, as Korosec has briefly remarked, "love" unquestionably belongs to the terminology of international relations" William L. Moran, "Ancient Near Eastern Background of the Love of God in Deuteronomy," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (Ja 1963): 79, citing V. Korosec, *Mednarodni odnosaji po klinopisnih porocilih iz el-amarnskega in hetitskega drzavnega arhiva [International Relations according*

As the Pharisees knew well, every Jew was responsible to heed and obey every word that proceeds from the mouth of God. That is what love of God demands. If you fail to do this in the least of any law, you have violated the whole law because you have failed to love the law-giver, who is God.

The Pharisees were listening with surprise because Jesus was going further in his requirements concerning the Law than even they were willing to go. As he had said earlier in Matthew (5.20): *“unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven”*.

Likewise with love of neighbour: this can be commanded because it is not a feeling or a sentiment but an expression of service. One is to do as much for one’s neighbour as one would do for one’s self in body, in mind, and in heart.

Ah, but who is my neighbour? The Pharisees had long taught that your neighbour was a fellow Israelite. So, you were to love your family members and you were to hate those who were not. But, for Jesus a neighbour was just what the word said: someone who, for whatever reason, had been brought into contact with you, even though you might normally hate such a person. Do you remember how he said: *“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you... or if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same?”* (5.44 and 46). Your neighbour is anyone whom circumstances draw near, for comfort, for help, for nourishment, for rebuke, for teaching, etc. Even those people that the Pharisees had taught the people to hate, the Gentiles, and specifically, like the military forces of occupation, the Romans, those people who would be destroyed when God revealed His Messiah, who would defeat the Gentiles.

And, who was this Messiah? That’s the question that Jesus turned around in vs 41-42 and asked the Pharisees, who were still gathered together like the kings of the earth against the Lord and his anointed: *“Who is this Messiah who will appear when the Law has been perfectly fulfilled, and what do you expect him to do?”*

They answered: the son of David. That is, the Messiah will be like David, a liberator, someone who will take citadels of the Gentiles by storm. The Pharisees had hoped that the Messiah would appear in their day to liberate them from the foul Gentiles, led by Rome, much like the radical Islamist hope today for the appearance of a Caliph who will appear and free Muslim lands from the hated infidels, led by America, and their Jewish proxies. For radical Muslims, the Caliph will be someone like Osama bin Laden who will strike the decisive blow that will weaken the grip of the Gentile oppressor; for the Pharisees the Messiah would be the new David who would strike that blow.

Jesus will have none of this. In fact, he goes right to the core of their hope in verses 43-45: You expect a liberator after the order of David. But, David’s own expectation was that the Messiah was to be his Lord, not his successor. The Messiah was to be the very one whom we are to love with our whole heart, mind, soul and strength... and whom we are thus to obey, whether we like it or not, even when he tells us to serve our enemies.

And there he was standing right in front of the Pharisees.

And he is here in our midst today: risen, ascended and glorified. And still requiring of us today that our righteousness exceed that of the Pharisees, for he did not come to abolish the Law, but to seal it forever.

Love is still the fundamental requirement from which all the commandments of God flow. Love of God and love of neighbour are still not a feeling, or an emotion, but a requirement of obedience for our good and the good of the whole world.

Families know this. It is not loving to look fondly on your children while they rush out into the busy street to play. Love requires of you at times to be firm, like a shepherd to use the rod not to smite your child but to show the way to safety and to joy. And sometimes, it hurts.

Almost 10 years ago now, my wife and I were at home enjoying a day off from our busy activities. Our girls were away and Jonathan was out playing on his new bike. The phone rang: the voice on the other end said: "there's been an accident; you'd better come over right away; Jonathan's been hurt".

I got in my car and rushed to the friend's house where Jonathan had been playing. I saw Jonathan's bike lying in the lawn, next to the ramps that he and his friend had made to practice jumps. Jonathan was sitting on the ground being held by his friend's mom, his arm covered by a blanket. I ran over to him. He was shaking, his face a little white, tears streaked his cheeks. I asked him what had happened. He told me that they had been practicing jumps on their bikes when he lost control and landed sideways. I said to him: "so you twisted your arm? It'll be OK." He said, with a weak voice: "No it won't, it hurts." I said: "well, when you twist something it always hurts, but it gets better." I was feeling relieved that all that had happened was that he had twisted his arm and nothing worse.

But, Jonathan insisted: "no, Dad, look" At that point he took off the blanket that still covered his arm. His arm was straight to his wrist, but then it took an unnatural 90 degree turn outwards, so that his hand was almost perpendicular to the rest of his arm -- but backwards. And as if to confirm that his wrist was broken, Jonathan, shaking, drew my attention to the sharp, white piece of bone protruding from his skin, right where someone's watch might be. It was covered with gravel and dirt, but you could still see that sharp, dull-white piece of bone.

Not surprisingly, I started to shake then. My poor, little Jonathan. I wanted to just hold him and comfort him. When the ambulance finally arrived, and they tried to move him into the vehicle, he cried out. He couldn't even move his arm without crying out he was in such pain. Out of my love, I didn't want them to move him. But, they knew better: they took him to CHEO with his arm as immobile as possible. And once there, the doctors and nurses knew better: there was more movement, more touching, washing of the wound, and of course the essential setting of the bone, and more details than I care to remember.

I loved my little boy. And I wanted him to be better. But, let me ask you a question: do you think that under my direction my little boy would have been better or worse off? I can tell you in all honesty now that I know he would have been worse off. His bone was broken; if we hadn't taken him to a doctor who would clean the wound and re-set the bone, Jonathan might have died of an infection. His arm would have healed in such a way that he might never again have been able to use his hand. All I wanted to do was hold him, and comfort him, to tell him it would go away. Was that love? Telling him that it will all be better when it wouldn't be without the real love that would make it better?

There have been many such times in my life -- as I imagine there have been in yours -- when I have failed to serve not only God with all my heart, not only my enemy, but even my family as I would want to be served and brought to wholeness. I did not even have the courage to love my son in a way that would have restored him to wholeness.

The ambulance drivers, the doctors, the nurses... all taught me an important lesson of love, about my own love for those around me and about God's love. About what it takes to love when things are very bad.

Like Peter, I would have done anything to keep Jesus from having to go to the cross. But, Jesus turned to Peter and said “Get behind me, Satan”. He turned to the Pharisees, who wanted to obey God but without costly love and said, as you can see in the next chapter of Matthew “you hypocrites”.

And so Jesus went to the cross to fulfill the whole Law perfectly. And wonder of wonders, he is the very same Messiah, the Lord Himself, who calls me to serve Him with all that I am.

This morning, we remember how that was made possible by the gift of himself on the cross. My son, Jonathan, will always have a mark on his body of the true love that is found in Christ, because at the sign of the break, Jonathan now has a cross right where the wrist broke.

But where is this reminder in our Gospel this morning, a reminder of the real true love that saves us all at a tremendous cost and with such a great reward?

With this I conclude.

After Jesus had recited the two great commandments from the Law, he added: “On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (verse 40). You who are Anglicans from long ago probably also remember that we used to say: “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets”.

That was a better translation in one very important sense. Because the use of the word “hang” would not have been lost on the earliest Christians who knew that that was also the word that the Law uses for the one who is hanged on a tree for our offences. For indeed the only one who perfectly fulfilled the commandments of God, beginning with the two great commandments, did so at the cost of his life, hanging there on the cross for us, not exempting us from the Law but fulfilling both law and prophets perfectly for us.

As we come to communion this morning, let us give thanks for our costly redemption, accomplished in the death and glorious resurrection not of David’s Son, a warlike Messiah bent on destruction, but David’s Lord, who is the Lord, God’s own Son, Jesus Christ, the author of our salvation. In whose name we pray. Amen.