

Leviticus 19:1-4

Psalm 1

1 Thessalonians 2:1-8

Matthew 22:34-46

Sermon for October 25, 2020

FOR THE LOVE OF GOD

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

Summary: You shall be holy, for I the LORD your God am holy.

Our Gospel reading for today has two distinct parts which, at least on their surface, don't seem to have much to do with one another.

In the first part, Jesus is asked a question about what the greatest commandment of the law is, and he answers that it is to love God and then adds that loving one's neighbor is closely related to loving God.

And in the second part Jesus in turn asks a Pharisee a somewhat sly question about one of the Psalms (110), in which David refers to the Messiah as his lord. But how can he be the son of David if David himself calls him Lord? is the question Jesus asks.

These are two very interesting exchanges, but as I said, there doesn't appear to be any connection between them. But appearances can be misleading, so let's see if we can discover the connection that might have been in the mind of Jesus or perhaps the mind of Matthew when he juxtaposed them.

For reasons that will become apparent, we'll begin with the second part first. So let me read it. This is Matthew 22: 41-46

22:41 Now while the Pharisees were gathered together, Jesus asked them this question, saying:

22:42 "What do you think of the Christ? Whose son is he?" They said to him, "The son of David."

22:43 He said to them, "Then how does David in the Spirit call him Lord, saying,

22:44 'The Lord said to my Lord, "Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool"?"

22:45 David then calls him Lord, how is he his son?"

22:46 *And no one was able to answer him a word, nor from that day did anyone dare question him anymore..*

This is a somewhat perplexing exchange, because Jesus most certainly regarded himself as the long-awaited Messiah, and it was universally understood among the Jews that the Messiah, when he appeared, would come out of the line of David, would be a direct biological descendant of King David, who had ruled over Israel a thousand years earlier. This was such an entrenched part of the Jewish understanding of the Messiah, in fact, that Matthew begins his gospel with a genealogy tracing the ancestry of Jesus, father through father, straight back to David.

Why then would Jesus, in our passage, seem to be suggesting that the David connection wasn't that important?

The answer, I think, was that Jesus wasn't focusing on biology here.

Those of you who come to our Bible Study class will already know that the Aramaic language that Jesus spoke differs from English and most modern languages in that it has relatively few adjectives. In Aramaic, at least when speaking in a context of importance, you would not normally speak of, say, a cheerful, jolly man; you might instead refer to him as a son of Santa Claus. You either name that actual quality – son of merriness, or son of joy – or even more dramatically, you name a recognizable figure who preeminently manifests those qualities, in this case, Santa Claus.

We do something similar in English when we say “He's his father's son.” We're not just saying something that's biologically obvious; we're saying he resembles his father, he shares the personality and attitudes of his father. You're saying, you can see the father in the son.

So when we return to our passage, what Jesus is saying that the Messiahship to which he, Jesus, is making claim would not rest on biological descent from a particular individual, but rather on spiritual resemblance to God. He would not be a Son of David in the important sense; he would not be a mighty warrior king forcibly subduing the surrounding nations and returning Israel to its place of preeminence in the world. He would be the Son who shared the commitment to sacrificial love as the power that might move the hearts of men and women to repentance. In his Sonship, you would see God the father, not David the King.

Much earlier in the gospel, Jesus is quoted as having used this understanding of Sonship in other contexts. The eighth beatitude reads: *Blessed are the peace makers,*

for they shall be called Sons of God. And later in that same fifth chapter of Matthew, he puts it perhaps even more forcefully:

You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may be sons of your Father in heaven...(43-45)

And if we are in agreement about that, then I think we're prepared to take a closer look at the first part of the gospel reading. Let me read it again:

22:34 But when the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together,

22:35 and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question testing him, saying, .

22:36 "Teacher, what is the great commandment of the Law?"

22:37 Jesus said to him, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.'

22:38 This is the first and great commandment.

22:39 And the second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'

22:40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

In responding to the question, Jesus pulls together two separate verses from two different books of the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy and the book of Leviticus. And by putting them together, Jesus is obviously saying that there is an important connection between them. But in typical fashion, Jesus does not say what the connection is, leaving that as an issue for the listener to resolve in his or her own mind.

It's very often suggested in explanation of the connection that the love of God must somehow inevitably entail or result in love of one's neighbor. But I myself don't find that explanation particularly compelling, at least if we understand the idea of 'love' in any ordinary sense. My neighbor Ed and I have known each other for over twenty years now, and while we get along fine, I certainly don't love him in anything like the way I love myself, no matter how you define love. When he retired from work last year, I congratulated him and I suppose I felt a little bit of happiness on his behalf; but it was certainly nothing at all like the way I experienced my own retirement a few years ago.

And that's my old next-door neighbor Ed! Go three houses farther west and you find people I don't even know, not to mention the people in Medina, or California, or China. If the love of God means I must invariably love them all as much or as

thoroughly as I do myself, then I must, if I'm being honest, acknowledge that *my* love of God must be extremely deficient.

And while that may very well be the case, let me go back to what we were talking about a moment ago, and see if there isn't another way of thinking about the relationship between loving God and loving others.

My suggestion is that the concept of loving God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength means something quite different from having a strong emotional attachment.

I say to you, love your enemies,...that you may be sons of your Father in heaven...(43-45)

What did we conclude? Love your enemies, that you may remind people of your Father in heaven.

Typically, when we do something and are asked why we're doing it, we'll give an answer in terms of how it gets us something, or profits us in some way, or how it fulfills some duty or obligation. Why do you mow the lawn? So that it looks nice. Why do you go to work? So that I can pay my bills. Why do you provide for your children? Because I'm obligated to them as their parent and I love them. And so on and so on.

Very seldom, when asked why you're doing such and such, would you say, "Because that's what my father would do," or "That's what my mother would do," without any further explanation, without explaining what a decent man my father was, or what a generous woman my mother was. Simply ending the explanation with mention of them would seem somewhat lacking or uncompleted.

But not so with Jesus. Why should I love my enemies? Because that's what God does. You mean, because it helps them? No, because that's what God does. Or maybe, because it'll make me a better person? No, because that's what God does. But why should I do what God does? Because God is good, just, decent, kind?

There is no further explanation. God makes the rain to fall on the good and the bad alike. You do the same. Why? Because that's what God does.

The author of Leviticus repeatedly makes the same point in the passage we read this morning:

You shall be holy. Why? Because I, the LORD your God, am holy...

You shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor. Why? I am the LORD.
You shall love your neighbor as yourself: Why? I am the LORD.

To love God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength means, I suggest, that we treat others as God does, whatever we may think of them or however distant and unrelated to us they might be. It means to have no other motive than to be like God, to reflect His personality, his behavior, his will, to be like this particular father in the treatment of his children. When we fail to do so, it's not a lack of strength in our emotion, but of our commitment to remind the world of God; it's allowing some motive to our behavior other than being like our father, which art in heaven.

And so our prayer for this morning, Father, is that you help us to purify our motives of anything that runs counter to your will, and particularly to your will with respect to your children. Help us to love our enemies because you love them, and ask for no further justification. Help us to lead our lives in the perfect image of Jesus Christ, who led his life as the perfect image of you, and in whose name we pray.