

Like It

Matthew 22:34-46

November 5, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Lindstrom

(This is a manuscript prepared for sermon delivery and may not represent actual words spoken.)

“And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’”

The Scripture passage we read today is a two parter. The second half deals with Jesus asking two questions. He asked, “What do you think about the Christ? Whose son is he?” We will be looking at the first part. Jesus was asked a question about the law.

It was an expert in the law who questioned Jesus about the greatest commandment. This expert had made a life out of studying the law. He perhaps wanted to narrow his focus to the study of the greater parts of the law.

So I read this passage, and I think of what goes on in our legal system. There are laws in this country. There are state laws and city laws and all that. There is what we call “the rule of law”. The rule of law is a legal principle. It basically states that law is what should govern a nation. Law should govern a nation as opposed to being governed by arbitrary decisions made by individual government officials or leaders. Sometimes provision is made for grace and mercy.

Now, I am no lawyer. Always wanted to be one...as you know. Then God intervened and got me involved in this grace gig. But there are a lot of lawyers out there. And lawyers disagree. Decisions made by one court can be appealed to a higher court...all the way up to the Supreme Court if necessary. Lawyers argue. Judges decide. Most decisions are not unanimous. Legal experts are not always of one mind as to what the law—or a specific law—says...or how it is applied.

Such was the case with legal experts in Jesus’ day.

There were some other questions that led up to what was asked in today’s text. The Pharisees asked for Jesus’ opinion on paying taxes. They asked, “Is it right to pay taxes to the government or not?” They were just trying to trap Jesus. Jesus saw right through their intent. Then it was the Sadducees’ turn. They had a question about marriage and the resurrection. Then came this expert in the law. He had a legal question.

The law in question here was not civil law. The lawyer was not concerned about the rule of law Rome imposed on the Jews. At issue was the Law of Moses...the law God gave to Moses. There were lawyers—experts in the law—among the Jews. They assisted in interpreting the Law of Moses. Funny thing...they did not always agree on the application of the law. So they debated. They reached decisions. Some of these decisions were added to the law. So the law given to Moses actually grew and became more of a burden to the people.

One quick example. Some of you have heard me use this one before. There is that law about honoring the Sabbath...keeping the Sabbath holy. So a question arose. How far could one journey on the Sabbath without dishonoring the Sabbath? Lawyers got together. They argued. They reached a decision. Half a mile. Travel more than half a mile on the Sabbath and you would be breaking the Sabbath. Half a mile became known as a Sabbath Day’s Journey. This decision became part of the law. The law just got bigger. Sound kind of familiar?

They also argued as to which laws were more important. From a strictly human perspective, some laws are deemed more important. Like to steal a candy bar is not as egregious as stealing a car—even though both are stealing. (I use this example because I once did pocket a candy bar and leave a store without

paying. But I have paid for every car I have ever owned.) Anyway, the lawyers in Jesus' day argued as to which were small laws and which were really big laws.

So this lawyer asked Jesus, "Teacher, which is the greatest law in the commandment?"

Jesus responded, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments."

So here's the deal on this. At first glance—and every other glance for that matter—it would appear Jesus answered the lawyer's question about the one greatest commandment by giving him two commandments. Indeed, Jesus mentioned the "first and greatest" commandment, and then the "second" one. Then he said all the Law and the Prophets hang on these two.

But, really, there is the one command to love. Love. We are to love God with our whole selves...love God with everything we have...heart, soul, and mind. Then we love our neighbor as ourselves. Jesus would later alter this a bit to say we are to love each other as he has loved us.

These two go together. There is not one without the other. If we say we love God, then it stands to reason we love each other. If we do not love each other, how can we even claim to love God? That is a fair question. John wrote in his first letter, "Anyone who says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother or sister is a liar." Now that is some pretty strong language. A liar. John went on to write, "For any who do not love their brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. And we have this command: Whoever loves God must also love their brother or sister." One command there for John...love for God and each other.

What was it Jesus said elsewhere? "By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you just love God." Right? Of course not. Jesus said, "By

this all will know that you are my disciples if you love one another."

One command. Love. Simple as that. Or hard as that...depending on how you want to look at it.

You see, as Jesus said, all the rest of the Law and the Prophets hangs on this. Think about it. If we love God with all we are...and love people...I'm thinking the rest will kind of take care of itself.

Our finite selves just cannot comprehend how much we are loved by the infinite God. We do not have nearly as much as God has. But with what we have—all we are—we love God. Then we see others as loved by God. And we love them, too.

The rule of law for those who follow Jesus is the law of love.

"And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.'"