

“Love Matters”

October 31, 2021

Scripture: Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Mark 12:28-34

“Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.” This is the foundational affirmation of Judaism. It’s known as the “*Shema*,” Hebrew for “hear.” I asked Rabbi Alex from Shir Shalom the other day what the significance of this statement is for Jews today, especially for those who don’t keep a strict practice. He said the *Shema* is the identifying statement of Judaism. It’s what all Jews are taught from a very early age. He compared it to the Lord’s Prayer for Christians. The *Shema* is deeply rooted in the psyche in the same way. I’ve been with people over the years who are in the later stages of Alzheimer’s yet can still recite the Lord’s Prayer. I’m sure the same is true for the words of the *Shema*.

The command to love the one God with heart, soul and strength lays the foundation for the whole Torah. Everything taught in Jewish ethics springs from those words. And those ethics encompass more than our relationship to God. They’re lived through our relationships with others. So Torah is filled with commandments about how folks relate to one another. Significant among them is how trials are to be held to ensure poor people are treated the same as wealthy people and what to do to care for the most vulnerable in society. One of the more impressive commands is the requirement that every fifty years all debts are wiped out and land is returned to its original owners as a way of eliminating debt slavery.

We shouldn’t be surprised, then, that when asked about the most important commandments, Jesus would turn to the *Shema*. And that he would add the command to love your neighbor as yourself, also from the Torah. He’s not the first teacher to put those together, as the scribe’s response tells us. But this encounter is a little unique in the gospels since it doesn’t involve someone trying to entrap Jesus or confuse him. This is someone who is genuinely impressed with Jesus’ answers to questions from other scribes. I get the feeling this scribe has asked something similar of other teachers and perhaps his own students.

As Jesus says, and the scribe confirms, loving God and loving neighbor go hand in hand. If we think of the Jewish affirmation to love God as a star around which the system of Jewish ethics revolves, Jesus’ answer becomes for us twin suns that revolve around one another and provide an environment to harness our actions in orbit around them. Everything we do here in worship, in our personal prayer lives, and out in the world in our mundane encounters are meant to circle the twin lights of love of God and love of neighbor.

One question that often comes up in relation to this; in fact, it’s a question that’s raised in the gospel of Luke when Jesus is depicted making this same answer, is “who is my neighbor?” Of course, in Luke Jesus tells the parable of the Good Samaritan. But the question itself remains for many of us. Do we think of our neighbor as someone who is already a part of our lives, someone who believes the same as we do or comes from the same background as we do? Or is a

neighbor anyone we might encounter, or even someone we've never seen before or will never actually meet but whose need we can help satisfy?

I think Christians are still divided on that question. Our tradition, the Reformed Tradition, teaches that anyone we meet who is in need is our neighbor. We've usually thought of that as anyone we even hear of in need. The great Reformer John Calvin, in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* taught that the essence of the Christian life is the denial of self and regardless of what wrong someone has done against us, because they carry the image of God we are compelled to love them. That makes the connection between love of God and love of neighbor: When we love God with heart, soul, mind and strength, then we're naturally drawn to God's image revealed in those around us. If we truly love God we can't help but love our neighbor.

So, what does it look like? What does it look like to love God and neighbor? Loving God begins, I suppose, with devotion. We love God when we take time to be in communion with God through worship and prayer. These things aren't meant to be done out of a sense of obligation or out of fear of punishment. Worship and prayer are intended to be a means of opening our hearts and spirits to the Divine Presence. We're not here just to go through the motions or jump through hoops. In worship we're asked to bring our whole selves to this communion, to be fully, nakedly present before God.

Worship may be the only place in our lives where we can allow that of ourselves. Everywhere else, in work or in social settings, even in our families, we often feel the need to hide behind a façade. We wear masques, not the kind that protect us from infection or even make us laugh or shudder. The masques we wear are the type that keep others out, that hide our hurts and fears. It's exhausting to be constantly maintaining that front. In worship God invites us to let it go. Instead of calculating and measuring our every action and word to be sure we don't reveal too much, we're invited just to be; just to love.

When we learn to do that, when we learn to love God fully and be fully present before God, we'll discover that love of neighbors feels more natural. Loving God will change what we love in others. We'll begin to see the world through new eyes and long for what God desires. The prophet Micah, steeped in the ways of Torah and calling Israel back to its roots in the deep memory of the *Shema*, asks: "What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Our relationship to God is expressed through acts of justice, compassion and humility. That's the world God desires; a world where love, lavish and indiscriminate, motivates us, not ambition or power or wealth, only love.

The last element of Jesus' answer is one that often gets overlooked. Torah teaches, "love your neighbor as yourself." A lot of us are wounded. We carry disappointments and trauma that have distorted our self image. Unfortunately, our tradition hasn't been much help with its emphasis on total depravity, as Calvinism puts it. We've been so immersed in the doctrine of Original Sin that many of us have come away feeling guilty if we dare admire something about ourselves, let alone love ourselves. But Torah makes it clear in Genesis that we are created good;

that we're meant to love even ourselves because we carry the image of God. How can we possibly be "totally depraved" if we bear God's image? By calling us to love our neighbor as ourselves, we're called to dare to love ourselves. Finding ways to silence the voices of self-doubt and self-loathing we carry around with us may be the surest path to loving God and neighbor. You are made to love...inside and out. God lives through you and you are good.

Hold tight to that truth and let it begin working on you. Learn to love yourself by loving God and you will truly love your neighbor, no matter where they are or who they are. You'll want for them the same justice and compassion you deserve. That's what will bring us closer to God's kingdom and we'll begin to live in love.

Amen