

“The Greatest Commandment”  
Mt. 22:34-46  
Sunday, October 29, 2017  
The Rev. Sharon Snapp-Kolas, preaching

Scripture. Prayer.

**Opening.**

Before I talk about Jesus’ idea of the greatest commandment – which is Love – I have to say a word or two about the 500-year anniversary of the Protestant Reformation.

It’s weird, when you think about it. It’s been five hundred years! You and I are members of a protest movement that demands the freedom to read the Bible for ourselves, in our own language! We’re members of a protest movement that asserts we are able to talk to God ourselves, without a priest between us and our Maker! We’re members of a protest movement that states when we put money in the offering plate, it goes to serve the mission and ministry of the church, not the enriching of the priests and the archbishops and the pope and the political leaders they are in bed with. You and I are members of a 500-year-old protest movement!

I thought about reading Luther’s 95 theses to you this morning... Lucky you; I thought again! They are very dry. The language is antiquated and the issues, taken out of context, don’t mean much to you or me. The details are interesting and important, but not for this morning. What’s important for this morning is to know that Martin Luther was a monk in the Roman Catholic Church. He knew that his own church was hurting the people and hurting the message of Jesus Christ. The church was acting unjustly. The church was basically stealing money from the people to put in its own coffers, all the while colluding with kings and other powerful folks.

Martin Luther took a courageous stand against his own church. He started a movement within his own church. That movement, the Protestant Reformation, is what we celebrate today,

500 years later.

Today, Protestants and Catholics get along just fine. Every day, Protestants convert to Catholicism and Catholics convert to a branch of Protestantism. It's no longer a protest against the Catholic Church. To me, three points stand out that I want to cherish and be deeply grateful for on this Reformation Sunday:

1. I can open up a Bible and read the Word of God for myself, and I can hear the Word preached in a language I can understand.
2. I can talk to God and have my own relationship with God, as Father, as Jesus the Son, and as the Holy Spirit.
3. I can take a courageous stand for Christ's Kingdom of Love in the face of opposition, as Martin Luther did.

Thank you, Martin Luther, and all the great leaders of the Protestant Reformation! We worship in freedom today because of your great courage.

And now we turn to our gospel lesson. And to start with I want to talk about balance.

## **I. Balance.**

Balance!!!!

It's so important to the art of living a Christian life.

God loves us. It's ok to drink that in, soak in it, bask in it, nestle into God's love like a warm blanket or our favorite cushy chair. We are to love God which includes loving others which includes loving ourselves, because to best love ourselves we need God and we need others. We need to love God and to love God we need to be a servant to others as Christ was a servant to us. God loves us, we love God, we love others – it's a big circle of never-ending love, given and received

What does the word “love” even mean to us these days? How do we define it? A group of professional people turned to a bunch of 4 to 8-year olds for some answers to the question, “What does love mean?” Here are some of the children’s startling and amusing responses:

Karl, age 5, says: “Love is when a girl puts on perfume and a boy puts on shaving lotion and they go out and smell each other.”

Elaine, age 5, says: “Love is when Mommy sees Daddy smelly and sweaty and still says he is handsomer than Robert Redford.”

Mary Ann, age 4, says: “Love is when your puppy licks your face even after you left him alone all day.”

Tommy, age 6, says: “Love is like a little old man and a little old woman who are still friends even after they know each other so well.”

Bobby, age 5, says: “Love is what’s in the room with you at Christmas if you stop opening presents and listen.”

Jenny, age 7, says: “There are two kinds of love. God’s love. Our love. But God makes both kinds.” (source: Frank G. Adams).

No scholar or theologian could say it better!

## **II. God’s strange law of love.**

Now the law of God’s love operates by strange rules. With most things, once we give it all away, it’s gone. We have an apple; we cut it into 4 pieces; we see 4 hungry people – the apple’s gone! But with God’s love, if we see 4 people hungry to know God’s love – the love is multiplied, exponentially. Let’s say we share God’s love with 4 other people. Let’s say they each catch the spirit of Christ and share God’s love with 4 other people. It’s now not only 4 people who have been introduced to God’s love. It’s not just 8 who have been added. It’s 4 x 4

= 16! And let's say each of those 16 share God's love with 4 more people. Now we've got  $16 \times 4 = 64$ ! And don't forget, there's still you, the original lover of God who started this whole exponential expansion of the kingdom. You can't just stop with 4 people knowing God's love, right? So you share with 4 more, too. And of course, while all these folks are sharing God's love, they're receiving more of God's love, as well. Love is an odd rule to live by. The more we give it away, the more there is.

When my brother preached his first sermon, it was in a country church in southern Michigan, near the little town of Coldwater. Now I think I've told you all before -- Glenn is a self-proclaimed nerd. He started a ministry called Nerd Church that continues to this day. Those who join Nerd Church tend to be fans of Dr. Who and Star Wars and Star Trek and The Hobbit. I, myself, am a card-carrying member.

Anyway, at a certain point in his first sermon, Glenn said, "Don't trust me; here's the math on that... You can trust my math..." He was tallying up for his listeners the number of siblings in Christ they might have, since the beginning of time. His math, by the way, revealed an estimated 35 billion Christians in all of human history, with approximately one-third of the present world population, or 2.18 billion, being Christians at this point in time. That's a lot of brothers and sisters in Christ! You can trust his math! He's a Nerd Christian!

In terms of God's law of love, the math of exponentially increasing love is a math we can trust.

God's law of love is deceptively simple. It's based on the "Shema," the most famous verses in Jewish scripture. Every child could recite them, and every adult, as well. It was traditionally spoken at the start and the finish of each day. It was posted on the door frame of every home. "Shema," the Hebrew word for "hear," or "listen." It's a word that means, "Pay

attention! Something important is coming next!” “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” (Deut. 6:4-5). So, in one sense, Jesus answers a very simple question that any Jewish child could easily answer. What is the greatest commandment? “Hear, O Israel...” Automatic, rote response. Like many of us know the Lord’s Prayer, having learned it and prayed it from childhood.

### **III. How to live accordingly.**

A woman once told me about a reminder she has posted on the door through which she exits her home each day. Her doorpost prayer reads: “Lord, help me to bless at least one person today.” [Carol Pistilli.]

Isn’t that a beautiful prayer to say as one heads out into the world? It’s a prayer that captures Jesus’ teaching. By blessing others, we show our love for God. By asking for God’s help, and by limiting our expectations – setting boundaries -- we allow ourselves to be loved, as well. This woman’s doorpost prayer is that complete circle of love for God, love for self, love for others that multiplies exponentially into love for the whole world.

I mentioned that the question of the greatest commandment is a simple one. Any three-year-old in a traditional Jewish family could recite the answer. “Hear, O Israel...” In another sense, however, the question of “what is the greatest commandment” is complicated to its core. We spend a lifetime as Christians trying to figure out how to love God with our whole selves. In Mt. 22 Jesus gives us a clue: If we act with love towards others, as we would have them act towards us; if we love our neighbor as we love ourselves – this is evidence of our sincere love for God.

Augustine says it simply and beautifully in his classic, City of God:

“In order that we may know how to love ourselves, an end has been established for us to which we are to refer all our action, so that we may attain to bliss. For if we love ourselves, our one wish is to achieve blessedness. Now this end is to cling to God. Thus, if we know how to love ourselves, the commandment to love our neighbor bids us to do all we can to bring our neighbor to love God. This is the worship of God; this is true religion; this is the right kind of devotion; this is the service which is owed to God alone.”

Love of self = Love of God = Love of neighbor. It's a circle... love of God leads to love of neighbor leads to true love of self, which leads once again to love of God.

One scholar warns against a warm fuzzy misunderstanding of love:

“In an age when the word ‘love’ is greatly abused, it is important to remember that the primary component of biblical love is not affection but commitment. Warm feelings of gratitude may fill our consciousness as we consider all that God has done for us, but it is not warm feelings that Deut. 6:5 demands of us but rather stubborn, unwavering commitment. Similarly, to love our neighbor, including our enemies, does not mean that we must feel affection for them. To love the neighbor is to imitate God by taking their needs seriously.” (Brian Stoffregen quoting Douglas Hare, *Interpretation Commentaries*, p. 260).

If we take our neighbor's needs seriously, we do things like forgive our enemies and pray for those who persecute us and feed the hungry and house the homeless and visit the sick and the prisoners. In order to love God, self and neighbor as a church family, we keep our commitments to each other: We support the church with our prayers, our presence, our gifts and our service. In keeping these membership vows, we participate in the circle of love that includes God, ourselves and our neighbors.

## Closing.

I'm told that at the entrance to the harbor at the Isle of Man in the British Isles there are two lights. You'd think the two signals would confuse the pilot. But the way it works, he has to keep them in line; as long as he keeps them in line, his ship is safe. It's the same with these commandments of Jesus: love of self, love of God, and love for others. When we keep them in line, we stay safe and well in the channel of the Christian life. (source: Jerry L. Schmalenberger, When Christians Quarrel).

We need to take a deep breath now and then. We need to remember that God's strange law of love includes God's endless, boundless love for us.

We can get so caught up in beating ourselves up for not doing more, or beating others up for not doing more, or too readily patting ourselves on the back and resting on our laurels.

God's law of love is like the laws of physics that God created. The laws of physics just are. They exist, whether we understand them or not. God's law of love just is. It exists, whether we understand it or not.

Augustine once said to God: "By loving the unlovable, You made me lovable."

Will you allow God to love you today? Will you allow God to make you lovable?

Turn to someone near you and say, "God loves you."

Now turn to someone else and say, "You are lovable."

With God's help, you can love God, you can love yourself, you can love your neighbors this week.

Let go, and let God love you.

Amen.