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Matthew 22:34-40
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Ask my Neighbor

This morning, I felt that call to ask the question, what does it mean to love your neighbor?

1. Do we know love by the words of Leviticus, pay your workers, do not throw the poor in prison because they are poor, and do not take revenge.
2. Do we know love by the wasteful love of Jesus's parables? The father forgives his prodigal son who does not deserve it. The Samaritan rescues his neighbor on the side of the road.
3. Do we know if we love by Paul's words? Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, and it keeps no record of wrongs.
4. Do we know love by James treating people equally whether they are rich or poor?

When I look at these biblical examples I conclude that biblical love is not about feelings, but about our actions. Love is a verb. It plays out in how we treat our neighbors, especially the poor. Love is interpersonal, how I treat other people, but it is also societal how do people with power treat the powerless?

What does it mean to love your neighbor? How do you know you are actually doing it right?

An interviewer asks an Amish person, "are you a Christian?" The Amish person shrugs, saying "I don't know, you'll have to ask my neighbor."
You'll have to ask my neighbor.

This story has always been a comfort to me. On one hand, I do not like to worry about if I am Christian, (with all the baggage and fear of hell that goes along with that) because it would be prideful to say I knew. On the other hand, when someone shouts I love you or I'm following the Bible, I get a say if I believe that statement.

But let me get more personal. Have you ever heard the words, "Hate the sin, love the sinner?" I have never felt loved by those words. I remember someone coming into my office saying those words. I felt my breath catch like I'd just been punched in the stomach. I did not call them out or state my own opinion, I will let you judge if I should have done that. I could only respond with the question, "Are your actions being received as love?" I hope that we all can take those words to our hearts.

You may be thinking, why is Pastor Jon only talking about the second greatest commandment? The Pharisees ask Jesus about the two greatest commandments, which Jesus says are like one another, love God and love neighbor. I think 1st John says it best

Beloved, let us love one another because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. We love because God first loved us. Those who say, "I love God," and hate a brother or sister are liars, for those who do not love a brother or sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.

Indeed, one interpretation is that these two commandments are one. We love God through how we treat one another. Our love for God cannot be fulfilled with hymns and prayers on Sunday. Our love for God is even bigger than faithfulness to God above all other idols, like money and guns. Our love for God should produce love for our neighbor because we worship a God of love.

Brothers and sisters, I cannot decide if the command to love is easy or hard. On one hand, it is easy in its simplicity, the logic of all the law and the prophets is summed up in a singular word. This law is so simple and foundational that it appears in all religions. Islam says, "not one of you is a believer until he loves for his brother what he loves for himself." The Buddhists say, "hurt not others with that which pains yourself." Hindus says, "This is the sum of duty: do naught to others which if done to you would cause you pain." So love is a basic human desire, a capacity within all humans.

But on the other hand, to love is incredibly hard. To love is to an action, we must act in the best interests of other people, even our enemies. The path of love is not always clear. When two of our neighbors are fighting, how do we love them? How do we love our enemies or people who are not following the rule of love? Because if we only love people who are good to us, that is not enough.