

19 Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25 – Year A – October 23, 2011
Deuteronomy 34:1-12; Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; 1 Thessalonians 2:1-8; Matthew 22:34-46
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For as long as “Top of the Pops” aired on British TV, every teenager knew where they’d be at seven o’clock on Thursday evenings. In the same way, almost every teen in America could tell you when American Bandstand was broadcast. I was ten years old when I fell in love with Labi Siffre. I can still see his performance of *It Must Be Love* vividly in my mind’s eye. The chorus incorporates a wonderful trinity of love, and goes like this, “It must be love, love, love.... Nothing more. Nothing less. Love is the best.”

There’s nothing loving about the scrutiny and testing of Jesus. As Matthew tells us Jesus finally silences the Sadducees, and so perhaps feeling more than a little self-righteous, the Pharisees gather together to challenge Jesus with another question. It’s an interesting strategy. There’s a certain safety and comfort in being one of the crowd. Who knows, maybe they thought peer pressure alone would sway Jesus’ resolve or silence His voice. For you and I that may be true. Nonetheless, as disciples of our Lord Jesus, it’s worth remembering that however many gather against Him, Jesus never compromises His integrity, His teaching, or His faith in God the Father. The Truth of God in Christ Jesus remains steadfast and unchanging, whether we are one voice in the crowd, or part of a growing chorus singing His praises, and sharing the Good News in word and deed. This time, the test question concerns the law and the greatest commandment.

God knows it must be love that keeps Jesus going by this point. The events of this week of testing in Jerusalem are leading up to His crucifixion. For the Judean leaders, this is the end game, the final bout in a deadly competition to hang on to their power, authority, and even the respect of the people. For Jesus, it is and always will be about love. Jesus’ response to this test is a clear affirmation and summary of the weightier matters of the law. It’s the *shema* prayer from Deuteronomy 6:5, spoken several times a day by every pious Jew. Translated it reads, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.” The love defined by Jesus is not an emotional or physiological response. It’s not about warm, fuzzy, loving feelings. Nor is it about fluttery and fleeting infatuation like that of a certain ten year-old girl we could all name. The most profound love is *agape* love, which is a conscious attitude and decision to love, as well as a matter of action. If our own will and attitude is rightly aligned, then loving God is our number one priority. But Jesus doesn’t stop there. He already knows what we have to learn, namely, we can’t love God, without loving what God loves. So Jesus adds, “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself’”. This commandment comes from Leviticus 19:18. The combination of these two commandments to love is unique to Jesus’ teaching. It’s also unique to Jesus as the living embodiment of Love, and the One who perfectly fulfills the Law and the prophets in His life, death, and resurrection. Jesus is love, and invites us to participate in love, and become love, as we’re transformed by the renewing of our minds, and better able to discern God’s will. According to Paul in Romans 12:2, that is “what is good and acceptable and perfect”.

Priest and author, W. Paul Jones, says that Christian love, the love that you and I are to embody and express fully in our lives is “one’s total response to being totally loved without deserve, without limit, and without qualification.... The criterion of Christian love is the extent to which it extends to the outer banks, embracing especially [those] who are outcasts to others.... Such expansiveness is never general, but concrete and specific.” In fact, Jesus is so specific about how we are to love that we tend to glance sidelong at His teaching. Equally, we have a tendency to want to water it down with qualifiers. Jesus says, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you” (Matthew 5:44). For us, it often becomes distorted in translation to something like, “I’ll try to love my enemies, except X, Y or Z, who are clearly unforgivable. Oh, and when I pray for those who cause me pain, I’ll just be asking God to smite them down and give them what *I* think they deserve.” Obviously, that isn’t what Jesus commands us to do. His version of love is to settle for nothing less than the best from each of us. Jesus’ vision of love is to go willingly to the cross for

the sake of the world, and to forgive His enemies to His last breathe. Jesus' example of love is to be a humble servant to all. He washes the disciples' feet and encourages us to do the same for others in humble acts of loving service.

Love is expressed in giving clothes to the poor, feeding the hungry, healing the sick and wounded in body, mind, and spirit, releasing prisoners from whatever bondage they are experiencing, and reconciling all to God by sharing the Good News of Jesus Christ. Love is praying without ceasing. Love is sacrificial and mutually uplifting. It builds trust, faith and hope, not walls or barriers. Love gives and forgives. Love cares so much for others that we're willing to put their needs ahead of our own. Love is sharing our gifts in a community of faith with a spirit of gentleness and forbearance. Love is hospitality, welcoming everyone into fellowship with the same expansive and boundless love that Jesus showed to sinners, tax collectors and lepers. Love is worshipping God in the community of Christ's Body. Love is acts of mercy and compassion.

We all know what Jesus said and did, and what we're called to do in imitation of Him. We know it intellectually. We also know that it's much harder to actually live it, even when we desire to please God, and agree wholeheartedly that it's the right thing to do. Sometimes our emotional responses get in the way, pushing us back, or urging us to turn away. God desires only the best for us. God desires that we share His love by seeking out, and serving Christ in others, especially those that the world deems unlovable. Remember, love is a verb, an act of will that flows from God's grace. Love is central to our lives in Christ, and central to our practice of God's graciousness here at Our Saviour. This month we're featuring the many concrete ways that we love God and love our neighbors through our outreach ministries. If you haven't already, please take a look at the bulletin board in Polycarp Hall. I'm proud to say that we **do** love a lot here!

Jesus also loves the Judean leaders enough to raise the level of the discussion, and present a question of His own. The purpose is to challenge and transcend contemporary Messianic expectations. Jesus is always challenging us to think bigger, expand the limits of our hearts, and our love. In response, we constantly examine our lives, and our hearts to see how God might be troubling us to transcend our pedestrian thinking. Discipleship demands that we prayerfully discern both individually, and as a community, God's will in how we're called to live the Great Commandment. For example, if we have no trouble loving God with all our mind, perhaps we're struggling to love God with all our heart or all our soul. With God's help we can we re-imagine, re-vision, in our minds, what it looks like to live and love God as completely as God loves us in Christ Jesus. As we seek God's help, He will reveal what we need to grasp on to, let go of, or change. When we ask, God will help us to understand how we need to grow, and what we need to prune away. If we're struggling to love our neighbors, we must ask what walls, barriers or boundaries we need to remove in order to give our whole self in God's service. What is holding us back, or distracting us? God will answer our prayers, and often in surprising and unexpected ways. It must be love if we're growing spiritually, if we're finding ourselves drawn into deeper relationship with God and others. It must be love if we're being transformed in heart, soul and mind. It must be love if we find the courage to reach out and serve Christ in others, as we've never done before. We cannot settle for anything less, because nothing less than God's love will do. His love **is** the best.

Amen.