

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera QLD

3rd November 2024 – 24th Sunday after Pentecost

Mark 12:28-34

LOVE WITHOUT LIMITS

‘How much do you love me?’ Have you ever asked someone that question before? Have you ever been asked that question yourself? It can be hard to quantify love, can’t it? Some answers we hear commonly bandied around are, ‘I love you to the moon and back’, or, ‘I love you with all that I am’. To answer this question with something like, ‘as much as it suits me at the time’, possibly isn’t a good answer. This week I conducted a wedding, and as always the very in love couple were staring at each other with those eyes which say, ‘I will love you forever and always and nothing will ever change that’. But we know that the reality of love, whether it is love of a spouse or partner, child, or even a parent or sibling, will have it’s times of ups and downs. There will be the times when you feel like you love someone fit to burst, that you couldn’t love them anymore, and even that this love fills and defines and directs your whole life. And then the times when in frustration, or anger, or disappointment, even though you do still love them, perhaps with a sense of guilt you feel like you need a break or some space. It’s hard to express a quantity for our love, and if we could we know that it would be always changing.

How much do you love me? What is the most important commandment? We might not see much of a connection between these two questions, but there certainly is in the answer which Jesus gives. The scene is Holy Week, just days before Jesus’ arrest, trial, death, and then resurrection. While Jesus is arguing with one lot of His enemies, the Sadducees, one of the teachers of the Law, or Scribes, being impressed by Jesus’ answers comes forward with a question of His own. Twelve times previously in Mark’s Gospel one of this group of religious leaders has come to ask Jesus a question, each time with the clear intention to try to trap Him into saying something which will get Him into trouble with someone. But now, at the final time, this guy is different. He is genuinely interested and thinking about what Jesus is saying. As one of these teachers he had 613 Laws of God to keep, so

perhaps it's not surprising that He wants to narrow that list down quite a bit and so asks Jesus, 'What is the most important commandment'.

Jesus' response? We know it well: 'People of Israel, you have only one Lord and God. You must love him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.' (29b-30). It's not new, but comes straight from the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 6:4. Jewish men recited this every morning, and the people of Israel were instructed to teach it to their children. And the second commandment Jesus gives in answer, 'Love others as much as you love yourself' (31b), is again straight from the Old Testament, Leviticus 19:18. Jesus doesn't come to replace the Law from the Old Testament, but to fulfill it in love. When we teach the Ten Commandments we also say they are summed up in love: commandments one to three are about our love for God, and commandments four to ten focus on our love for others.

Love doesn't replace the Law, it fulfills the Law. If we think about it, love and the Law, or rules, can be a bit different, can't they? Why do we love? It's an internal motivation. There is something about that person which I like, or admire, or desire, or attracts me, and that moves me to want to do all I can to please them and make them happy. The Law, or rules, are often more about, 'do this, or else!' So, it's no wonder that Jesus, following on from the Old Testament, focuses more on love. People had focused more on the, 'what happens if we don't do it?', but Jesus came back to, 'why do we want to do it?'

Jesus put all the commandments in the Bible down to two simple ones. To take that now a step further, we can bring them into one command: Love without limits. How much are we to love God, with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. That's everything, isn't it? Everything we are, everything we do, everything we think, everything we say, everything. Over all these things we put God's love. And for others? Love others as much as you love yourself. To 'love yourself' can be seen as an insult for someone who we think prances around and acts like they're pretty good. But in this case it's referring to how we treat ourselves. What do we do? If we are hungry, we eat food. If

we are thirsty, we drink. If we are cold, we put on something warm. If we feel we are in danger, we do what we can to protect ourselves. In most cases we do what we can to give ourselves happiness, satisfaction, security. And so, the call is, in love, to love others in the same way, doing all we can for them also.

Why do we love without limits? Because that's how God loves us. That's the love we see in God coming into the world as a tiny baby to be one of us. We see it in all that Jesus did in His life, in His death for our sakes, and in His rising again so we can have new life also. We see this limitless love in all that God provides for us; the beauty and wonder of Creation, and also the way it supports all life including our own. God's love is in the people we love and who love us. It's in the things we receive, large and small, in our lives each day. God's love is in the hope, peace and joy He gives us in our lives, and also the forgiveness we know is ours when we don't do all that He asks of us here. If we ask God, 'how much do you love me?', in answer we can look to everything we have in our lives, and to our very life itself. God shows, over and over again, that His love for us is limitless.

The response we are called to make? To also show this limitless love. How are we called to love God? With all our heart, soul, mind, and strength.' What does that mean for us? Where do we place God in our lives? Right at the very centre. Love for God and showing that love is a part of our whole lives, not just one part we put away in its special spot. It's in our worship together as well as in our own prayer, Bible reading and time spent with God, but it's also in our time with family and friends, our work, the things we do for fun, how we view and use what God has given us. Our love for God directs, determines, drives, guides us in everything we do. How does that challenge us? To show this limitless love, are there any parts of our lives we are being called to examine or reassess, so they are more reflective of the love God shows to us?

And then, loving others. In some ways it's a bit harder, isn't it? How do we love others? As we love ourselves. That is also a limitless love; it is all encompassing. Remember also that our love for God is seen in how we love others. That adds more to it, doesn't it? So what does this look like?

How does showing love without limits affect how we treat people, how we accept people, how we forgive people? How does it direct us in putting the needs of others before our own? How does what Jesus calls here the ‘second most important commandment’, call us to treat people in all our relationships; from those we are closest to, to those we see occasionally, to those might see at the shops, on the road, even online? To show this limitless love, are there any parts of our relationships with others, and how we treat and view all people, which we are being called to examine or reassess, so they are more reflective of the love God shows to us?

Love without limits is what we receive from God, and what we are called to live out. It sums up the summing up Jesus gives when He’s asked to give the most important commandment. When we ask God, ‘how much do you love me?’, God says, ‘there are no limits’. In response to this, because we can and we want to, not because we have to or we’re afraid not to, we also strive to show this love each day. And a part of this is that while we know that in our humanness our love does still find limits, God’s love, including His forgiveness when we fail, never does. The love we live in, the love we respond to in our gratitude, the love without limits we are now called to live out and share. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- How do you go with describing the depth of your love for someone? Is it something you can do? If you can do it: what terms do you use to describe it, and does it stay the same always or change from time to time?
- Think about the command to, ‘love God with all your heart, soul, strength, and mind’. Take the time to reflect on this. What does it look like for you to do this in your life? How do you go in doing it? Are there any areas of your life in which you find it difficult to do? If so, give these over to God and ask for His help with them.
- Think about the command to, ‘love others as you love yourself’. Take the time to reflect on this. What does it look like for you to do this in your life? How do you go in doing it? Are there any areas of your life in which you find it difficult to do? If so, give these over to God and ask for His help with them.
- Think about what it means that we love God because we want to and can in response to His love for us, and not because we fear punishment if we don’t. What difference does living in God’s limitless love make to your life?

*Pastor Andrew R. Koehler
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