

St. Andrews Lutheran Church, Tallebudgera

5th November 2023

Matthew 22:34-40

LOVE ...

Do you ever get asked the question “What’s your favourite?” And if you do, how do you go answering that? What’s your favourite movie? Your favourite book? Your favourite song? Your favourite drink? Your favourite holiday destination? At the beginning of this week I was at a Kindy grandparents’ day with my three year old grandson, and one of the questions we had to complete on his sheet of paper about me was, ‘What’s your favourite food?’ “So, Papa, what’s your favourite food?” As I started thinking about this, and obviously thinking about it for more than a second was too long, he jumped in with, “Do you like watermelon?” “Yes”, I said, “I like watermelon”. “I like watermelon too. Write that down”. So now, officially recorded, my favourite food is watermelon, not apparently roast pork as I had always thought. They can often be difficult questions to answer, can’t they, these ones which require one absolute answer. I always want to say; it depends on my mood, or how I’m feeling, or can I have a top two, or top ten, or even top 50? For some of those questions it is easy and straightforward, but for others we might feel that the answer is much broader and more complex than giving it just one, absolute, straight answer.

“Teacher, which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” (36), is the question Jesus is asked in this reading here. Like the question we looked at a couple of weeks ago about paying taxes, this is again asked by Jesus’ enemies, the Pharisees, just days before His arrest and execution, and is designed to trick Him into giving an answer which will make Him unpopular with the people. “Which is the greatest commandment in the Law?” We might think it’s not too hard a question; there are only ten commandments, and surely the first one to have no other gods is the most important. But the Pharisees had 613 commandments, 248 ‘thou shalt’ and 365 ‘thou shalt nots’, which they had taken from the Bible, so if we are choosing from all of them that makes the choice a bit more complicated. And their patience in listening to Jesus’ answer was probably about as long as my three-year-old grandson’s.

Another question for which there is seemingly not just one answer which will cover it all and satisfy everyone.

But Jesus, again, comes up with an answer which totally stumps those who are trying to trick and trap Him. What is the most important commandment? Jesus sums that up with one word; Love. Love for God, and love for others. It is the word which sums up God's relationship with us. It sums up the whole story of the Bible. When we think about the Ten Commandments what Jesus says here talks about the first three commandments, our love for God, and the final seven, our love for others. For the Pharisees, Jesus' questioners, God's Law, God's guidelines or rules which lay out God's relationship with His people, they are all about penalty, and fear, and knowing and obeying the Law to the letter as being the one and only important thing. For Jesus, it is all about, love. Love for God, love for others. The two inseparably go together. It's all about love.

Let's pull these two parts of Jesus' answer apart a bit more. "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." (37) Just have a think over that for a bit. What does that look like to you? To me, if I think about what God has done for me in Jesus, if I look outside at the beauty of Creation, if I think about all the many blessings I have in my life, it is easy to love God completely out of a sense of gratitude, of awe, of appreciation for all that He has done for me. When my head is in that space and way of thinking, and all is going well for me, I really do feel and experience a deep sense of love for God and who He is in my life.

But what about when things aren't going so well, how do we do then? When we feel that our prayers go unanswered? When hardship or suffering continues on for ourselves and others? When we see innocents being injured or killed and we question the wisdom and power of God allowing/causing/accepting, whatever it is, that happening? They are times when our love for God can be challenged, can't they? And that's an ok, and human, thing to do. One of the best things we can do at those times is to continue to pray, to go back to God and His Word, to spend time with Him either alone or with others, to bring our anger and worries and concerns to Him, and to hear His words of love and care for us in all things. 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind', and ask for His help in doing that at the times when it's not so easy to do.

And this ‘love’ Jesus talks about here isn’t just something we feel or experience, it is also something we do. How do we love God? Think about that. We worship Him. We pray to Him. We seek to serve Him in our lives. We give of our time, our talents and what we have to serve Him both through the Church and in other ways. But it’s not always easy, is it, to love God with all our heart, soul, and mind? Other things become more enticing and tempting to do, bringing us more instant gratification, than coming to worship, or praying, or Bible reading. It becomes easy to see all we have as being solely ours, we earn it, rather than what God has given us to fulfill our needs, to enjoy, and to use to serve Him and others. ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’

And then, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ (39) Looking at that, the first one is a bit easier, isn’t it? While we know we don’t always love God perfectly, that’s easier than it is to love others, especially when we remember that this means *everybody*. And again, ‘love’ here is not just a feeling word, but it is doing. And Jesus puts the two absolutely together; if we love God, we will love others. How does that look then for us, each day? Think about the people we are close to in our lives; who we live with, work with, worship with, see regularly. ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ In talking about how we love ourselves here, Jesus is reminding us that we all generally want to feel safe, accepted, happy, to have our needs met, so loving others means we are a part of ticking all of those boxes for them too. Is that always what we are achieving in how we talk to people we see regularly? Do we respond to their needs in the way we would like them to respond to ours? Do we want others to forgive and move on from our mistakes, but hold on to and resent what is done to us? How much does our selfishness, our intolerance, our impatience, come into our relationships, and how hard to we find that to let go of? ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Some people are easier to love than others, let’s be honest, but in the Bible we are regularly called to show the love God shows us to everyone. It is a big task, an impossible ask, but it is what we are called to aim for.

What about the people we just see more quickly in passing? Those who serve us in a shop, our fellow road users, friends or family we just see occasionally. How do we show God’s love to them? How do you already do it? How are these words of Jesus calling you to change some of your words,

actions, attitudes? How we treat all people, whether we know them or not, whether they know us or not, is to directly come out of our relationship with God. All of God's teachings, which Jesus summarizes here as the Law and the Prophets, come from here; love God, and love others.

It's a big ask, as we know. The timing of these words of Jesus is important; it happens just a few days before He dies on the cross for our sins, including our sins of not keeping these two commands. On that cross, Jesus shows us how great God's love for us really is. On that cross Jesus paid the price for us not always keeping these commands perfectly. On that cross Jesus also gives us the strength, the motivation, to keep on trying to always show love as tough as it can be. Just days after saying these words, Jesus showed what it really means to live them out, and in doing so He now helps us to live them also.

As I said a few weeks ago, I wish I was as good as Jesus at coming up with answers to difficult questions, and especially here when He can use just one word to sum up what it means to live a life in God and following God: Love. Love is what we receive. Love is what we are called to share. Love is what lies at the heart of our relationship with God; His great love for us and our response of love to Him. And love is what we are called to now share, with all people, as difficult as that can sometimes be. God's love always be with you, and God's love always help you to live a life of love in Him. Amen.

FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION/REFLECTION

- 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' Have a think about this command from Jesus. How do you go with keeping it? Are there times when you find it easy to keep? Are there times or situations in your life when you find it hard to keep? Bring these to God and ask for His help with them.
- 'Love your neighbour as yourself.' How do you go with this one? Are there people with whom you find this commandment easy to keep, and people with whom you find it difficult? Honestly think about your relationships with others, and consider how you go with showing God's love to them. Bring to God any parts of your life in which you struggle to reflect His love as you interact with people.
- Love God, love others. Reflect on how these two are so closely related. Take the time to think about all the ways God shows His love to you in your life. Ask for His help in showing this love back to Him and to everyone who you have a relationship with in any way.

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