

Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18

Matthew 22:34-46

Love Matters

It happens daily around our communities. People helping people. There are organizations that feed people, clothe them, house them. Just in our own few block radius I think of Grace Place, Underground Gym, the Thunder Bay Food Bank, and Shelter House. As a congregation we have supported each of these places in different ways. For years people from this congregation helped to prepare meals on different days during the month at Shelter House and when those teams could not be sustained the decision was made to make sure that food and financial supports have continued.

Right now, we are in the middle of a food bank drive for the Thunder Bay Food Bank on Miles Street. We do that at least twice a year. As one who has brought the collected food over to the Food Bank, I know how much that support is appreciated. We have donated mittens to St. James Public School and the Underground Gym. For the last few years, we have been a part of the Undercover Clothing Project of the Community Clothing Assistance organization in which we purchase brand new underwear and socks, gather it up and give the items to the organization to provide to families as part of their work. I could go on as we also help a number of other organizations including Elizabeth Fry and Lifewater.

I do have a question. When we do all of this what is our motivation? Do we even think about it? Now not for a minute am I questioning the validity of this generosity. It is beautiful and needed. The generosity and gifts bring resources to others. But when you purchase food for the food bank or give money to our mission projects, what is the motivation?

My hope is that it comes from texts like the one we heard read, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.”³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself.”

Sharing resources is an act of love. It is a response of love to our loving God. Now all of this might seem like plain speak. Shouldn't this all be obvious? Yet, sometimes it can be helpful to ask the question why? Why do we do what we do? We don't ask the question in order to change everything we do, but rather to make sure that our motivations and actions align with our living out our lives as part of Christian community, and in response to the love of God for us. When you buy a gift to put under the Christmas tree here at the church for families, or purchase socks and underwear, food or give cash for Jan to spend on your behalf, do you feel the love?

I ask these questions not only for you but of myself? You may already be someone who imagines the child or family that may be the recipient of the gift you give, though you will never meet them. When you do so, do you give out of pity or respect, understanding that life often brings hardship?

This past week I have spent time in my daughter's home in Toronto listening to her do her work. Her daily job is one of teaching people about equity and diversity. She is continually discussing with people about bias and about the wonderful diversity that is a part of our lives and how we react to that. Knowing that I had a sermon to write for Sunday and that it included the words, you shall love your neighbour as you love yourself, I couldn't help but be confronted with the many ways we say with our hands and our spending that we love our neighbour, as we give to these worthy causes and charities, and yet judge the very people we are giving to.

I am struggling with how to say what I am thinking. Not because I don't know what I am thinking, but because I don't know how each of you thinks and how what I might say will be received. And maybe it is because I know that I am not always consistent in my own thinking. So let me give this a shot and an example.

At times when I purchase food for the food bank, I will buy a cake mix and a container of icing hoping that it will allow for a family to make a cake for a special occasion. I imagine the family, hoping that this small gift might bring a little joy into a challenging situation. When I buy underwear or socks, I have often bought for older boys knowing how tempting it is to buy pretty little socks and cute underwear for little girls. I have donated alongside many of you to the work of Lifewater as they build wells for communities. I do these things because I think it is important, but almost never do I think to myself, I do this because I want to love my neighbour.

I know when we give, and because many of us have been raised to be charitable people, we give because we know it to be the right thing to do, but what I am getting at is, do we do it out of love...do we do it out of love for our neighbour?

Again, I am not suggesting for a moment that all of this giving, for whatever reason, is not a good thing. But as followers of Christ, it may be important to remember that we do all of this out of love. You see, for us as Christian community we are called to love, to love and serve the Lord our God with all our hearts and with all our souls and with all our minds, and to love our neighbour as ourselves. As Jesus says, to those who are testing him, these two commandments are the important ones. These sum up all of the law of God. Remember those Ten Commandment, well they are summed up in these two statements. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind, and love your neighbour as yourself.

The assumption here is that you do love yourself, or at least know that you are to love yourself even when you are not good at it. And by the way, this is not a new thing that Jesus is saying. When asked what the greatest commandment is, Jesus, who is himself Jewish, quotes Deuteronomy 6:5, "You shall love the LORD your God with all your

heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” We are not sure why he changed the last word from might to mind, but it might have been because it was learned and thinking people, teachers of the Torah, that were continually questioning him.

The second part of the answer Jesus gave, “You shall love your neighbor as yourself”, comes directly from verse 18 of Leviticus. Again, these answers were not new. Every Jewish child learned of these things. It would seem that the simplest, most basic answer to the questions of the Pharisees, was one that everyone and anyone in earshot would have known.

Jesus, this itinerant teacher, the son of a lowly carpenter, this man with a following that the authorities were trying to trip up, was filled with wisdom and understanding. I often wonder whether Jesus was frustrated by all of this or patiently waiting them out. Whatever he is feeling, he takes this moment to ask them a series of questions that will trip them up,

“What do you think of the Messiah? Whose son is he?’ They said to him, ‘The son of David’” Then Jesus said to them, quoting from Psalm 110, “How is it then that David by the Spirit calls him Lord, saying, ‘The Lord said to my Lord, ‘Sit at my right hand, until I put your enemies under your feet’? If David thus calls him Lord, how can he be his son?’”

If nothing else, this exchange has shown the authorities that Jesus knows the Hebrew scriptures, but essentially, this is the end of all questions. The fact that the leaders of the people cannot make a mockery of Jesus, cannot out speak him, cannot find a way to bring him down, means that the talking has stopped. From this point forward they will seek out a way to stop Jesus even if it means killing him.

And the thing is, Jesus knows that this is what is going to happen. He knows that earthly power will always try to stop the power of the love. Love that is shown not only in words but in action.

In a world that is as broken now as it was in Jesus’ time, earthly power and authority will continue to fight against love. Still, the love of God is more powerful. The love of God gave us the flesh and blood of Jesus that in the mystery and power of the cross proved love breaks the barriers of hell. And right now, it would seem that hell has broken loose on earth, with the ongoing war in Ukraine, with the horrors of the war in Gaza, and opioids taking the lives of people of all ages. With the encampments that cities worldwide are dealing with because people are not seen as worthy of our compassion, care, and resources, and the increasing use of food banks because of food insecurity, hell can seem pretty close at hand.

In all this, we forget that the love of God that was displayed on the cross, that defeated death, is the love that dwells within us. This love is a gift of God through the work of the Holy Spirit in us. This is the love we respond to when we love our neighbour. It is the power of love that we share when we see Christ in the face, in the body, of anyone and everyone we encounter.

Don't let the world tell you that love doesn't make any difference in Gaza, in the Ukraine, in the encampments, in our supporting our missions, purchasing food or clothing and giving it as part of our work. But also don't forget that it is because of love that we do what we do. It is because of love that we call ourselves the church. It is because of love that we are the church, the people of God.

Love for us is not only an emotion, but more than anything it is an action. Love is something we do intentionally as our response to God's love and for the sake of the world. Love matters!

May you know the amazing and deep love God has for you and know that this love is for every one, no matter who they are, or what you might think about them. God's love matters and our love matters. May we go from this time of worship to love God and love others in Christ's name. Amen.