

*Wholeheartedness*

Deuteronomy 6:4-9, John 13:34-35

I know that when you hear familiar texts from the Bible like the ones we just read, there's a tendency to click your mind off and think, I've heard those words before; there's nothing new here. (I know this because I sometimes do it myself.) But you can also say to yourself, as I hope you will this morning, "They must read those words often in church because they're really important to Christianity." Today I'm asking you to come with me for a few moments of digging into these texts, because I believe they hold the core, maybe the most important words of our Judeo-Christian tradition.

Both passages, you probably noticed, were about love. That word has lost so much of its meaning because it's over-used. We love our dogs and our cars and our favorite shoes. I love *your* favorite shoes. It takes more than the word "love" to move or impress us. God loves you—check, move on. Love God, love neighbor, love each other; sure. But let's stop and treat this word "love" as if it matters, as if it is the most important word God would want us to hear today—because it is.

The passage from Deuteronomy was the first principle of the Hebrew people, the set of words that bound them together. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your strength. The Sh'ma, it's called: words that Jews still repeat like Christians say the Lord's Prayer. It is part of every worship service, every child memorizes it, it's the sentence inside every mezuzah, those little boxes that hang on the door frames of many faithful Jewish homes. It is part of what Christians have inherited from the Jewish tradition Jesus came from.

Today I want to focus on one word of the Sh'ma, the word "all". What does it mean to love God with all your heart and soul and strength? Does it mean that you're supposed to love God until there's no room left for anyone else? What about relationships with other people? What about other things that might occupy your strength or time or attention—like a spouse, or children, or your job? Does God expect you to remove yourself from your real life, sit in a small room and meditate most of every day?

The Jews in Old Testament time thought a lot about what it meant to love God with all your heart, soul and strength. They thought so much about it that they came up with about 673 rules about how to do it right. They lost track of what the original idea was. So finally someone had to ask Jesus, What's the *greatest* commandment, the one that matters the most? There are two, Jesus said, and they are equally important: Love God, and love your neighbor, as fully and carefully as you love yourself.

This is helpful. But what happens when those two commandments conflict? What should I do when loving other people requires compromising a principle that seems to me like something God would feel strongly about? How do I love God with all my heart, soul and strength and still have something left over to offer a neighbor? Why didn't Jesus talk about that?

So we come to the other reading for today, from John 13. The scene is the last night Jesus spent with his disciples—what Christians often call Maundy Thursday. In every other one of the other gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke), what happened that night is the story we repeat every time we take communion, where Jesus breaks bread, passes around a cup of wine, and says to them, this is how I want you to remember me: in this meal.

In John's gospel, there is no story of the last supper. Instead, consciously, intentionally, John tells a different story, a story of Jesus washing his disciples' feet. Jesus bends down, takes off the outer clothes that give him dignity and presence, and washes off their feet all the garbage that they've been walking through all day in a busy city that has no sewers and that is crowded with tourists. (Think about it.) This is how I want you to remember me, Jesus says to them. On my knees, doing something you would pay a slave to do.

That's the story that ends with the words we read this morning: Love one another. *This* is how I want you to remember me, Jesus said to them. This is how other people who come along after I'm gone will know me: when they see you loving each other in *this* way.

I want to notice this morning that Jesus didn't ask the disciples to remember him by a set of principles or advise them to remove themselves from life with other people so that they could stay in touch with God. Instead, he said with a simple action: You love God with all your heart and soul and strength by loving one another.

Maybe loving God is the same thing as loving your neighbor. Maybe there's no more *all-your-heart* sort of way to give yourself to God than loving what God loves, paying attention to God's creation, caring for people in this world the way God cares for them. Maybe loving God is not taking yourself out of everyday life; it's loving all the ways God appears right in front of you—most often wearing skin, often propped up on feet that have walked through quite a bit of muck.

Washing feet is a pretty extreme image. Did Jesus mean we're supposed to sit in the dirt and clean up all the messes other people walk through? Is that what it means to be a Christian? This particular story happens when Jesus is with his disciples alone. He didn't say the same thing to the 5,000 people who came to a hillside once, to hear him speak and get some food. The people he was talking to here were the twelve who had been traveling together. They'd been like family to one another. Washing their feet was the way Jesus showed them that he loved *them* with all his heart and soul and strength. It said to them, "go to the extreme for one another". Don't hold back. Be willing to go to the edge of what you can do and feel and offer and even stomach if that's what loving each other requires of you.

You can't do that with the whole world. No one can live that way, spread out on the floor all the time. But you *can* do it with a community that feels like your own. You can give all your heart and soul and strength; you can be willing to love to the ends of your capacity the people who feel like *your people* in some way. Most of us would do it for our families, our children. Jesus said to his disciples, and now to us who come together as a community tied together by a common faith, "Love each other *that much*. That's how I want you to remember me; this is what it means to love God."

I'm pretty sure Jesus didn't mean for the twelve disciples to sit around and feel good about loving on each other for the rest of their lives; he meant for them to go out and change the world. Here's what he knew: the practice of loving can stretch your heart. It's like running or walking every day, exercising your muscles so they get stronger. The muscle for loving can get stronger too—with exertion, with exercise that pushes it out to the edge of its capacity—so that the *all* of it gets bigger.

After my daughter Stacey was born, I was beside myself with love. I loved her so completely that I was convinced I had no more room in my heart for another child. Other people managed to do it, but I couldn't imagine how I could ever love another child as much as I loved her. I know now, from 25 years of being a parent, that my heart would have stretched if I'd had more children, that it has stretched. Now I know that's what hearts do, with practice.

I think maybe that's why you are part of this church. Whether you came here looking for God or looking for people—a community to belong to—you knew intuitively, maybe subconsciously, that loving takes practice. Churches are places where you practice loving with your whole heart and soul and strength, if only because somebody keeps asking you to do it. Church *ought* to be a community where you encouraged and sometimes *challenged* to kneel down and wash somebody else's feet—even when it's possible, and so much easier, to just take care of your own.

As I've returned to this community after four years away, I see many ways this church has been a practice field for loving. It's interesting to come back and see with fresh eyes, and I wonder if I can see things that you may not be able to if you've been here all along. Here's what I see:

I see how you care for one another – in neighborhood networks, in small groups. It looks to me like you are people who are willing to know each other well and to be devoted to one another's well-being.

I also see how your hearts have stretched to include a bigger piece of the world. At the beginning of October, on that Saturday 200 people fanned out to do service across the community, every single person in my group had participated in a Volunteers in Mission trip. I see that *service*—hands-on, roll-up-your-sleeves service to help other people—is now part of the DNA of this church, in a way that was not always the case.

And one more: I have always thought that SRVUMC is a place where people come not to burnish their resumes or round out their social connections, but because they are earnest about their faith. But now I hear in my conversations around here even more soul-fulness, a spiritual yearning that moves me deeply. This is another stretch mark, a way in which this congregation is learning together what it means to love God with all your mind and soul and strength.

I heard recently a story about a couple who has been married for a long time. They begin each day with a little ritual that they call “canopy”. They sit facing each other, with their legs sort of entwined and their hands clasped behind each other's back. They touch their foreheads to one another's, and they are simply silent together. They are silent so that they can hear one another breathe, and they sit in that quiet, meditative posture until they have staggered their inhaling and exhaling. One of them takes breath in while the other breathes out. Quite literally, they take in

and breathe out each other. They don't say any prayers or make any requests of God or each other; they simply sit in that silent, sacred closeness for a few minutes at the beginning of each day. And this, they say, is the key to making their days go better, and to staying in love, to keeping them connected.<sup>i</sup>

This is what we do in church. In a less intimate way, we come here on Sundays to pace our breathing in of God's spirit and our breathing out love-in-action with these other people who are our companions on the journey of living life faithfully. This is where we experiment with being in relationship with people who were not born part of our family. Here we practice giving ourselves away to each other, loving until it costs us something, so that when we're called to go out into the world and do it for someone else, our *loving* muscles will be ready. This is where we learn what *all* means, where we learn to love with our whole hearts.

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<sup>i</sup> From Robin Meyers, *Saving Jesus from the Church*, p. 203