

# The Law of Love

29 October 2023

St Peter's

Reading: Matthew 22:34-46

Once when I was preparing a family for the baptism of their child, the whole family was gathered for the talk. It came time for the little boy to go to bed. He was three. He went around the whole room kissing each member of the family: wishing each one good night, greeting them by name, then kissing them and saying I love you. Good night mummy, I love you, kiss. Goodnight, Grandpa, I love you, kiss. Good night daddy, I love you, kiss. He came to me, looked me up and down and said in a loud voice. But I don't love you!

We teach our kids from early on to love members of our family. And it's right that we do. Love is that feeling that we get when we think of those we cherish. But this soft basket full of puppies is not what Jesus had in mind when he said love your neighbours. Jesus' love has much more to do with a commitment to another's good than it does to a warm feeling.

Matthew, our Gospel writer for today, is deliberately contrasting the lawyer with Jesus the new law giver. Matthew is mostly written for a Jewish audience and Matthew is portraying Jesus as the new Moses. Moses gave the people of God the old law, Jesus is giving us the new people of God a new law, the law of love.

We are not well served by our English word love. The ancient Greek writers had up to eight words for love, each with a different nuance. What Jesus is cunningly doing here and what makes it new is that he is combining the requirement of Leviticus to love your neighbour as yourself, and the requirement of Deuteronomy to love God. In other words, loving our neighbour is an outpouring of our love for God.

Jesus is at odds with the lawyer asking the difficult questions, today it would probably be a journalist who has a legalistic understanding of love which contrasts with Jesus' way of love. If we had to find a single English word to replace love, to better get at what Jesus is meaning, that word might be compassion. Which literally means to feel with.

In Luke's gospel the same question results in Jesus telling a story. The story of the Good Samaritan. It is not out of love that the Samaritan helps the Jew, rather it is from his heart. He is moved with pity or compassion or, we might say, empathy.

But how can compassion look different from law?

A young man was shot in a shooting. He lay dying in front of a church. A group of horrified parishioners gathered around him waiting for the ambulance to arrive. As his life energies steadily slipped away, the young man could be heard over and over again crying out for his mother, but to no avail. Suddenly a woman broke through the crowd and bent down to cradle the dying man gently in her arms. Rocking him tenderly she repeated in assuring

tones, "I'm here son, everything's going to be okay." As the man breathed his last, she blessed him with the sign of the cross.

A few days later, filled with scruples, she appeared at the door of the vicarage. She wanted to confess that she had lied, she wasn't his mother. She felt guilty for what she had done. Even though at the time she felt drawn to comfort the man crying out for his mother. She left the vicarage with peace of mind and a sense of affirmation because the vicar had reassured her that she had done nothing wrong, indeed she had acted out of Christlike compassion. Like Jesus, she had embodied the compassion of God for another.

"Which is the greatest law?" Jesus is asked. Two thousand years later this seems an easy question but for the Jews there were over six hundred laws, so this was no easy judgment call for them.

Our problem isn't getting the answer. Our problem is that love today has become just a warm fuzzy feeling like a shampoo advertisement. But Jesus is on about something much deeper - a commitment of heart, soul, and mind.

In the tenderness of Paul, writing to the church in Thessalonica, we see what real love looks like. He writes, "Though we might have made demands on you, we were among you as those who were gentle, like a nurse caring for her own children. So deeply do we care for you that we shared not just the gospel but our very selves – because you are so very dear to us." This is love – the sharing of our very selves. And sharing not for personal gain but with tenderness and gentleness.

To begin to live this new law of love, we need only ask ourselves, how would I like to be treated. This is the golden rule: treat others as you would want to be treated.

If I am talking about someone else, would I be happy to have them hear what I'm saying? Would I like it if my neighbor brought in my wheelie bin for me? Would I like to have someone jump ahead of me and take that car park?

Throughout his life, Jesus embodied compassion. By proclaiming good news to the poor, sight to the blind, healing to the broken and hope to the hopeless.

At our baptisms we too are commissioned in this ministry. To be a little Christian in the community we find ourselves.

A statue of Jesus was wrecked by shelling in a small village near Normandy. The hands had been completely blown off. After the war the villagers had to decide what to do with the statute. One group argued it was so badly damaged it should be pulled down. Another group argued for it to be restored. But a third group won the day. It remains to this day handless but with the inscription added to the base, ***I have no hands but yours!***