

Sunday, October 18, 2026
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost (Proper 24A)
Leviticus 19.1-2, 15-18; Matthew 22.34-46
The Rev. Michael K. Fincher

“Just Imagine . . .”

Whenever I hear Jesus’ response to the question, “which commandment in the law is the greatest?” I cannot help thinking of my maternal grandfather. Whenever you asked him a question that had a choice, particularly an “either/or” question, he would invariably respond, “Yes.” Or perhaps “No,” But usually a response that did not directly answer the question. Which invariably caused me and my cousins to laugh and comment on the silliness of his answer. We were just kids, after all. As we grew older, the laughs turned more into groans with the addition of eyerolls. But we loved the playfulness he exhibited, nonetheless.

While I seriously doubt Jesus was being playful in his response to the question posed by one of the Pharisees, even after all these years, I still can’t help but be a bit flabbergasted by Jesus’ response to the question as to which of the commandments is the greatest. He starts with “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ This is the greatest and first commandment.” Okay, fine. But he does not stop there. He continues on with “And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’” This is where the engineer in me rears his sarcastic little head. What part of the question did you not understand? Asking “which commandment in the law is the greatest” implies a single answer. One commandment. Just one. Not two. Although, I suppose Jesus could be forgiven, as he does say “the second is like it.” Perhaps stretching the intent of the question a little. But, I suppose when your father is the one who handed down the commandments, you can take a few liberties. And, of course, he then connects the two with the concluding statement, “On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Actually, the question as to the greatest commandment is not particularly unique to today’s Gospel. It was a common exercise among religious scholars at the time to debate which of the 613 commandments contained in the Torah, in the Law, was “the greatest.” It was a theological exercise to seek to identify the one commandment that summarizes, that captures the essence of, the entire Law. With 613 commandments in the Torah, there was bound to be differing thoughts among scholars. Although some were likely eliminated just because of the mundane nature, such as dietary laws. Prohibition against eating pork was probably not going to make the cut for being the greatest commandment.

Today’s Gospel reading, and the question as to the greatest commandment, are part of a larger ploy in which the temple authorities are seeking to discredit Jesus. Or even better, from their perspective, to find justification for charges of blasphemy. Today’s encounter with the temple authorities is the third such attempt on this one particular day in which Jesus is teaching in the temple. First was the question as to whether it is lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not—the question we looked at last week. Second, which we did not get in this year’s lectionary, was a question posed by the Sadducees about the resurrection—something they did not believe in. And third is the current question about the greatest commandment. Given the prevalence of this single question among religious scholars, the temple authorities are apparently seeking to

test Jesus' credentials as a rabbi. To determine whether his theological perspective is orthodox or heretical.

As we heard, Jesus responds with not one, but two commandments. Both solid choices. Neither of which, on their own, could really be disputed as a contender for greatest commandment. Two commandments that come from different parts of the Torah.

The commandment "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind" is a portion of a much larger prayer known as the *Shema*, which means "listen" or "hear." Coming from the opening words in Deuteronomy chapter 6: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might" (Deut 6.4-5). This section of Deuteronomy along with several other passages from Deuteronomy and Numbers form the entirety of the *Shema*. More than a prayer, the *Shema* is perhaps more akin to a confession of faith—along the lines of our Nicene Creed or Apostles Creed. The *Shema* is so central to the life and faith of Jews that it is traditionally said twice a day, at evening and morning prayer. Given the importance of these words, the centrality to their faith, it is understandable that this would be Jesus' choice for the greatest commandment. And, in all honesty, he could have stopped there. No need to append another "greatest commandment" to his answer.

And yet he does. The other commandment Jesus deems worthy of inclusion as the greatest is, of course, "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." This particular commandment comes from a section of ten chapters of Leviticus commonly referred to as the "Holiness Code." So named because it addressed the broad demand for holiness in living across all areas of daily life. Providing a variety of commandments to help one live a life of holiness. Specifically, Leviticus Chapter 19—a portion of which we heard as our Old Testament reading—contains commandments on ritual and moral holiness. This chapter opens with God saying to Moses, "Speak to all the congregation of the people of Israel and say to them: You shall be holy, for I the Lord your God am holy" (Lev 19.2). The life of holiness is understood as more than just ethical quality; it is behavior that imitates God's behavior and actions. And right in the middle of Leviticus Chapter 19, right in the middle of the section on ritual and moral holiness, is the commandment "you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord" (Lev 19.18). Quite often in scripture, placement of a particular verse or section is significant. Here, indicating that the commandment to love your neighbor as yourself is central to ritual and moral holiness. Indicating that loving neighbor as self is one of the central means of imitating God's behaviors and actions. Of living into the holiness that God desires for his people.

As we look at these two commandments and their scriptural context, we begin to see how the two indeed work together. How the second is like the first. Particularly in the context of holiness. The first being about the worship of God and the second being central to the Holiness Code. Making a definitive statement of Jesus' theology. Making a definitive statement for Jesus as to what it means to worship God and to live a holy life.

Although, the bringing together of these two commandments is not unique to Jesus. The connecting of the two commandments is found in at least one earlier Jewish work, the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs. A non-canonical work that purports to record the final words, moral confessions, and prophetic visions of the twelve sons of Jacob. Fundamental to

this body of work is the area of ethics, particularly as exemplified in the adherence to God's commandments. Specifically, the two commandments—love of God and love of neighbor—stand side-by-side as a summary of the Law. Jesus, however, understands these two commandments, and indeed the connection between the two, in a new and radical way. Sure, others had linked the two commandments, with the commandment to love our neighbor as flowing from, as being a result of, our love for God. Jesus, however, made the connection more specific, more concrete, than implied in scripture or than exegeted by previous scholars.

For Jesus, the two are inseparable. We demonstrate love of God through love of neighbor. And our love of neighbor flows from, is motivated by, and is a means of demonstrating our love of God. The means by which God's love for creation is demonstrated in tangible ways. To love one's neighbor, particularly those who are sick or infirm, who are poor, who are marginalized, etc. is to love those who are of greatest concern to God. How we love God with our whole heart, soul, and mind is by loving our neighbor. For Jesus, you cannot love God without loving your neighbor. After all, if you cannot love the neighbor whom you can see, how can you possibly love the God whom you cannot directly see physically. The writer of the First Letter of John makes this connection canonical in writing, "Those who say, 'I love God', and hate their brothers or sisters, are liars; for those who do not love a brother or sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen. The commandment we have from him is this: those who love God must love their brothers and sisters also" (1 John 4.20-21).

When Jesus states the greatest commandment as being about love of God and the second being love of neighbor, he is not ranking them. He is not putting them in the order of importance. Loving God is not more important than loving neighbor. He could have just as easily stated that love of neighbor is the greatest commandment, with the second being love of God. After all, he used the qualifying connector of "the second is like it." Effectively equating the two in terms of importance. Although the ordering in which Jesus listed the commandments is the logical choice in terms of cause and effect. In terms of motivation. Loving God with all our heart, and all our soul, and all our mind—with our whole being—is only made tangible, only made real, in the outward action of loving our neighbor as ourself.

The definitive statement of the inseparable connection between these two commandments is indicated in Jesus' concluding his answer to the Pharisees by saying, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." In so doing, Jesus is calling on ancient Jewish scholarship and tradition. The *Mishnah*, a collection of Jewish legal and exegetical teachings, includes the idea that the world "hangs" on the Torah—the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (what we call the Old Testament). That the Torah holds up the world, like a coat hanging on a coatrack. Here, in Jesus saying "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets"—on these two commandments hang the Torah—Jesus is effectively saying that the Torah itself "hangs on the love of God and love of neighbor. On the extravagant love of God and neighbor.¹ Jesus' refinement of the *Mishnah's* image leads to the conclusion that the wellbeing of the entire world is dependent upon our demonstrating our love of God through how we love our neighbor. This is not a period on Jesus' answer. This is an exclamation point.

While Jesus' statement should speak for itself, I will finish with one thought to ponder. With one musing that I ran across this week in an email from a biblical scholar who writes a Substack publication called "Heretic Adjacent." He notes, "It's easy to say the right things about loving

God and loving neighbor. Rolls right off the tongue. But what happens when we start putting those commands into practice?"² To which I would further refine to, what happens when we start truly seeing love of God and love of neighbor as a single commandment, as the single focus of our lives, individually and collectively? Just imagine . . .

¹ <https://www.saltproject.org/progressive-christian-blog/2020/10/19/two-kinds-of-love-salts-lectionary-commentary-for-twenty-first-week-after-pentecost>

² <https://derekpenwell.substack.com/p/what-everything-hangs-on-matthew>