

*To Fall in Love with God*

Matthew 22:34-46

Whitefish UMC

October 23, 2011

- † In the last few weeks, a number of you have asked how I determine which scriptures will be read on any given Sunday. Many of you know that I preach mostly from the lectionary—a group of passages from the Bible that includes a three-year cycle. Each week the list includes a passage from the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament), a Psalm, a Gospel, and a New Testament Epistle or letter.
- † In some churches, all four lections (or passages) are read each Sunday. In others, one Old Testament, one New Testament. In our church we usually read a psalm responsively, and then I choose either one or two passages based on what relates best to what’s happening in our community, our church, or the world. I like to think that I rely on the Spirit’s nudging, too.
- † This week it was no contest, really. One writer says he likes to handicap the choices each week, imagining which one preachers will choose. He says: “...these [other] fine passages share the colossal bad luck of running against the mother of all lections. When the Pharisees ask Jesus which commandment is the greatest of all, his answer defines the central calling of the faithful for all time:
- † ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart...soul...mind...love your neighbor as yourself.’ Here Jesus opens a window to divine priorities. The race on this Sunday will not be close.” (Hilton)

- † For me, Jesus’ great commandment is the heart of the Gospel—everything else falls under its importance. I wish everybody who has a “God’s Ten Commandments” sign in front of their place would substitute Jesus’ words about loving God, self, and neighbor instead. I know, those are fightin’ words for some folks!
- † In his answer to the Pharisees’ question, Jesus gives two separate commands: the “greatest,” to love God; and the second, to love neighbor. Although he says “the second is like” the first, Jesus does not collapse the two, as if love of God *equals* love of neighbor. And we probably shouldn’t collapse them either.
- † Given the two, it’s tempting to skip straight to neighbor love, partly because as the scripture says in I John 4:20—“those who do not love a brother or a sister whom they have seen, cannot love God whom they have not seen.” Mostly, though, it’s easier to skip over loving Godself because it’s more mysterious and elusive and harder to preach.
- † It’s easier and more tangible to talk about justice or charity or doing unto others as we would have them do unto us. It’s easier to say that Jesus’ second command assumes love of self, and talk about self-acceptance or self-esteem. And these aspects of the great commandments are certainly important.
- † But what if instead we were to ask: “What does it mean to love God with our whole life?” How is it possible to fall in love with God?
- † A few minutes ago, we sang the contemporary song based on Psalm 42. In case you’ve forgotten, here are the words again:

As the deer panteth for the water  
 So my soul longs after You  
 You alone are my heart’s desire

And I long to worship You.

You alone are my strength, my shield  
To You alone may my spirit yield  
You alone are my heart's desire  
And I long to worship You.

I want you more than gold or silver  
Only You can satisfy  
You alone are the real joy giver  
And the apple of my eye.

You alone are my strength, my shield  
To You alone may my spirit yield  
You alone are my heart's desire  
And I long to worship You.

You're my friend and You're my brother  
Even though you are a King  
I love You more than any other  
So much more than anything.

You alone are my strength, my shield  
To You alone may my spirit yield  
You alone are my heart's desire  
And I long to worship You.

- † Be honest, now: did you have trouble singing these lyrics with conviction? I confess that I do. If you really think about them, they're a bit over-the-top, aren't they? Do we even *want* to love God like that? I wonder.
- † It's tempting to just dismiss sentiments like these as artistic license. And sometimes I even consciously disdain them, for it makes being a Christian all about "me and Jesus" instead of focusing on Christ's love for the whole world.
- † And then of course, I would usually rush to remind us of the different words for "love" in Hebrew and in Greek—distinguishing the erotic, the brotherly and sisterly, and the agape love of compassion. Surely Jesus didn't mean for this love of God to be like the love one feels in the most intimate relationships.
- † Yet, over the course of history, some of the most revered and widely read medieval contemplatives from Christianity and Judaism use much more explicitly erotic language than "As the Deer" does. "To cite two of many, John of the Cross's poem 'On a Dark Night' begins with the poet 'kindled in love with yearnings' and moves on to images of caress and entwined repose;
- † And *Sefer Hasidim*, a twelfth century rabbinic collection from Germany, sees in [the Hebrew Bible equivalent of] this passage in Deuteronomy 6:5 a call to love God with a passion far more intense than that of a couple experiencing the pleasures of sexual intimacy after a prolonged separation." (Hilton)
- † Ah—but that was then and this is now, we say. The erotic love of God doesn't work so much for us. But what metaphors will? One writer in the tradition of Ignatius of Loyola has hoped to be "seized so completely by the love of God that all the desires of my heart and all the actions, affections, thoughts, and decisions which flow from them are directed to God."

- † How would we obey a command “to be seized?” What elements of our love for God do we control? How do we imagine loving an unseen God?” And yet, if we were truly in love with God, wouldn’t everything else flow from that love?
- † Retired Bishop Reuben Job, in his wonderful little book: Three Simple Rules, cites “staying in love with God” as one of the three rules to living as a faithful Christian. (The other two are “do no harm” and “do good.”)
- † I love what Bishop Job says about how Jesus is to be our example in practicing this third simple rule. He says: “We can accuse Jesus of many things, but we cannot accuse him of neglecting his relationship with God. He must have learned early how important it was to stay close to God if he was to fulfill his mission in the world. He must have learned early that there was power available to live the faithful, the fruitful, the good life and this power involved staying connected, staying in touch, and staying in love with his trusted Abba.”
- † Bishop Job cites Henri Nouwen: “Look at Jesus....His message of love was rejected by a world in search of power, efficiency, and control. But there he was, appearing with wounds in his glorified body to a few friends who had eyes to see and ears to hear, and hearts to understand. This rejected, unknown, wounded Jesus simply asked, “Do you love me, do you love me, do you really love me?” He whose only concern had been to announce the unconditional love of God had only one question to ask, ‘Do you love me?’”
- † These questions of Jesus to Peter reveal a great deal about the essentials of our relationship with God. Staying in love with God was the primary issue of a faithful life then and now. For from such a life of love for God will flow the goodness and love of God to the world. It can be no other way.

- † “One who is deeply in love will be constantly formed and transformed by that relationship. And such a transformed life will be a natural channel of God’s goodness, power, and presence in the world.”
- † So love of self and neighbor proceeds from love of God. “What makes the temptation of power so seemingly irresistible? Maybe it is that power offers an easy substitute for the hard task of love. It seems easier to *be* God than to *love* God, easier to control people, than to love people, easier to own life than to love life. Jesus asks: ‘Do you love me?’ We ask, ‘Can we sit at your right hand and your left hand in your Kingdom.’” (Nouwen)
- † How do you fall in love? There’s no one answer. But once you are in love with someone, you want to spend time with them, to get to know them, to create music with them. Our niece Anya has a young man who is a music major smitten by her. So he posts daily songs on her Facebook page. The music perhaps expresses what he cannot in person.
- † You can’t make yourself fall in love with God. But God is wooing you with the colors of a golden autumn sunset. God beckons to you in the sweetness of a new baby’s breath. God invites you into relationship when just as you think it’s darkest, a friend offers a glimmer of light. All you have to do is open your eyes, your ears, and your heart.
- † Then sing, pray, dance, laugh, and yes, get angry sometimes, with your beloved God. And the rest will happen naturally. God’s love will flow through you like an everflowing stream of life. Yes it will. Amen.

Sources:

Reuben Job, Three Simple Rules, a Wesleyan Way of Living. 2007.

Allen Hilton, Feasting on the Word. 2011.

