

Getting Dressed for Service
January 21, 2024
Colossians 3:12-17; Mark 12:28-34
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In our household we have an interesting way of asking for a favor of someone. We will start off by asking, “Do you love me?” Or “How much do you love me?” often it is met with a sigh or a rolling of the eyes, a chuckle and the reply, “What do you want?” We all smile and then the request comes. “Could you bring me a blanket.” Culturally we know that one expression of love toward others is by our actions, doing little favors, or meeting a need of the other. Taking the extra time to do something for another, paying attention to their needs and meeting it even when not asked are acts of kindness and love.

This command in today’s Gospel reading is very familiar to us, but what does it really mean to love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength? That is what I want us to delve into over the next couple of weeks. What does it look like in our daily lives to love God and love one another?

In this reading we have a scribe, a devout Jewish scholar, seeking the key to faithful living and eternal life. He sees Jesus answering others with insightful and profound answers, so he asks the question. “What is the greatest Commandment?” Now mind you he already knows the Ten Commandments that Moses gave the Israelite people on Mount Sinai. As a scholar of the Torah he studies the 600+ Levitical laws that faithful Jewish people are expected to follow. So it sounds like he wants to simplify his devotion and know what command is most important perhaps.

Jesus could have chosen any one of these commands, instead Jesus chooses a command found in Deuteronomy 6:4-5 that is used as a prayer said two times a day by any practicing Jewish person. It is called the Shama because the first word of the prayer is “Listen or Hear” - Shama. To listen or to hear is more than just acknowledging the words that someone has said. It also implies that we will act upon them. When we

find the word listen as a command it is really saying, "Listen and obey." When we call out to someone saying, "listen, listen." It should cause the other to stop and pay attention. To stop talking or moving, raise our awareness and tune our ears to try and hear what the other is trying to say. Kind of like how I respond when I hear my family say, "Do you love me?" I stop and listen for the request.

Listening is an act of prayer, when we stop and tune our ears to God, awaiting to hear an instruction, guidance from God. It takes time and practice to become aware of God speaking to us. If you recall the story of Samuel, the prophet and how he first heard someone calling his name in the night and he thought it was his teacher, Eli. It took Eli discerned that it was possibly God's voice speaking and he instructs Samuel the next time he hears that voice say "Speak, for your servant is listening." (1 Samuel 3)

That is something we can do as individuals, but it is also something that we as a collective community of believers need to often do. Listen for God's guidance for our future. When we gather as a committee or council, or as a church like today, we come with the intention of collectively discerning what God may be calling us to do. It should be an intentional act of stopping and listening for God's guidance or inspiration. It requires time, opportunity to hear from others and ask does it help fulfill this command or honor the vision and mission that we have discerned as our collective purpose. Is it grounded in love or advance our love for God, neighbor, and self? Jesus, in the story continues with these words, "you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength." When one prays this in the morning you are setting the intention for the day. When you pray it at the end of the day, you are reflecting on the day gauging how well did you love God through your words and deeds.

Jesus adds a second command, that is not part of the Shema "And love your neighbor as you love yourself." The original source for this second command comes from Leviticus 19:18 which reads. "You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself." Jesus brings together

these two commands and intertwines these loves. He is laying the foundation to faithful living upon which each disciple or follower of Christ is called to live by.

Now it seems straight forward. Love God and love one another. throughout the New Testament we hear this refrain said in different ways. Things like:

- “They will know you are my disciples by your love for one another.” (John 13:35)
- “No greater love has one than to lay down their life for another.” (John 15:13)
- “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” (Matthew 5:43-44)
- “If any wish to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me.” (Luke 9:23)
- “If you love me, you will keep my commands.” (John 14:15)

So, I think it is safe to say these two commands are the bedrock of faith. But what does it mean to love God with all our heart and with all our soul and with all our mind and with all our strength? What are some ways that we can grow in love and faith? What are some practices like the Shama prayer that help us deepen our relationship with God and with one another?

All forms of spirituality incorporate rituals and various practices as an expression of devotion to aid in deepening our love for the Divine. Some of these practices are individual, others are done within the community. Some are done frequently, and others have a set time when they are practiced. We call these spiritual practices. Things like prayer, reading of sacred texts, worship and singing, confession or repentance, service or charity, giving, sacraments, and fellowship or assembly with other believers are all acts of devotion.

All these spiritual practices are tools or aids to lead us into a deeper love for God and love for one another. The goal is not perfecting the practice itself. It is to gain a deeper

awareness of the divine and to change behavior as a growth outcome experienced through the practice. The end goal is to deepen our love for God and love for one another. It sounds simple but it is not easy. That is why it is called practice.

In our second reading from Colossians, Paul is instructing the church how to practice love and how to move away from hurtful and sinful ways of being in the world toward virtues that are based in love. We see here five virtues lifted up: “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” If you read from the beginning of chapter three you will find two corresponding list of items we are to take off: “Verse 5 has this list: sexual immorality, impurity, passion, evil desire, and greed (which is idolatry).” He continues in verse 8 with these words, “But now you must get rid of all such things: anger, wrath, malice, slander, and abusive language from your mouth.” But it is not enough to stop these bad things, we also need to put on or practice these other virtues that are all based on love.

These are all forms of community practices and parts of our worship of God. When we gather together, we should always put on our Sunday Best. Let us put on “compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” Let us hear the words from Colossians and work together to be a place where “the word of Christ dwells in us richly; as we teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God.” This is what it means to get dressed for service, by putting on our Sunday Best, the virtues of a loving community that seeks to grow in love for God and love for one another and seeks to practice being the people of God, to the glory of God. Amen.