HOW LOVE GROWS Sermon for October 29, 2017

[Leviticus 19:1-2, 15-18](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=165#hebrew_oth_reading)

[Psalm 1](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=165#psalm_oth_reading)

[1 Thessalonians 2:1-8](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=165#epistle_reading)

[Matthew 22:34-46](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=165#gospel_reading)

Our Gospel reading for today has two separate parts, and on first reading them, they seem to be relatively unconnected.

In the first part, Jesus responds a question asked him by some Scripture scholars. In the second, Jesus turns the table, so to speak, and asks them a question.

For today, we're going to focus our attention on the first part, and leave a discussion of the second part, and of how the two parts are related to another occasion.

In the first part, someone Matthew calls a teacher of the Law, seeking to trap Jesus, asks him what the greatest commandment in the Law is?

By way of background, we should be aware that what the teacher was referring to when he asks about the Law is in fact a large and very complicated body of laws - 613 of them altogether - found in various lists scattered through the OT books of Exodus, Deuteronomy, Leviticus and Numbers. A so-called teacher of the law would be someone who had familiarized himself with that vast collection of laws and was called upon to interpret them and adjudicate among them when there was an apparent conflict, much like a judge or referrer is expected to do when there is more than one infraction.

Back to our Gospel reading. The teacher of the law asks Jesus which of all these laws in the most important, and Jesus responds by citing a verse from the book of Deuteronomy:

*"Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind." (Deut. 6:5) And then he immediately adds that the second most important is a commandment found in the book of Leviticus, in the passage we read as our Hebrew Scripture reading this morning: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

Before looking at this answer more closely, I'd like to read you another passage, this one from the tenth chapter of the gospel of Luke.

"A teacher of the Law came up and tried to trap Jesus. 'Teacher,' he asked, 'what must one do to receive eternal life?' Jesus answered him, 'What do the Scriptures say? How do you interpret them?' The man answered, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind'; and 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' "You are right," Jesus replied. "Do this and you will live."

It's an interesting contrast, isn't it? In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus supplies this answer, while in the Gospel of Luke, the teacher of the law supplies it.

Now it may be the Jesus expressed this same thought on more than one occasion, or it may be that Matthew and Luke were depending on somewhat different oral traditions. That really doesn't matter. What matters, and I think even receives extra emphasis because of the difference, is that these two commandments - to love God with all your being; and to love one's neighbor as oneself - are inextricably united in the mind of Christ. And since the mind of Christ is the mind of God, surely t behooves us to reflect on why this should be so.

My own thought is that is yet another example of a law of the Kingdom of heaven, a law that Jesus illustrates for us in many ways. The law goes something like this: In the spiritual world things always start small.

Jesus loves small things. He loves mustard seeds. He loves little children. He loves small lumps of leaven.

You almost never see Him talking about and applauding large things: great buildings, imposing mountains, conquering armies. But even when He does mention them, it’s almost always to emphasize their unimportance or their transience, or to contrast them unflatteringly with something else.

No, the heart of Jesus is with small things.

Why is that?

Is it simply because, in nature, large things always start out as small things?

I don't think that's it. It is vitally important that we always remember that Jesus did not come to teach us about the way the world works. We did not need the Son of God to become incarnate flesh and dwell among us to teach us the same things we could learn from our next-door neighbor or from our high school biology teacher, or from our shrink or from our President or from Solomon or Buddha or Confucius.

Jesus came to teach us things only He could, things only He knew, only He had seen. As He Himself put it: "...we speak of what we know and report what we have seen..."; and again "...no one has ever gone up to heaven except the Son of Man, who came down from heaven."

No. I think what was Jesus is telling us is that there is something about the way that small things grow into big things that is like the way things must grom, if they are to be of use, in the spiritual world.

How do things grow from being small to being big?

Hell's Canyon is a great wide and deep canyon that marks much of the border between Idaho and Oregon. I once attempted to walk it alone. After a series of misadventures, I ended up being carted ignominiously out of it and back to civilization courtesy of a knock-kneed old pack horse with a wooden saddle. I'm still a little sore from that ride, almost forty years later.

Why did I fail so epically? Because I tried to be Daniel Boone without ever having been even a Cub Scout.

The rule of success in the spiritual world - in the Kingdom of God - is always gradual growth, it is slow, it is accretive, it builds on what has already been accomplished.

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.

How do you do that? I don't even know what it means. Loving anything with all my soul? With all my mind? What does that even mean? I love my wife in one way and to a certain degree, my parents in another way and to a certain degree, my country, my church, my friends. I love to eat. I love to read. I love to study the Bible. So I sort of know what love is. But I can't imagine what love - as I understand love - would occupy my whole being, body and soul and mind, And just saying "Oh but this is different. This is the love of God" doesn't help. Or at least it doesn't help me.

And it's this, I think, that Christ is teaching us about. A mustard seed does not know how to be a plant so large and strong that the birds of the air can take shelter in it. An acorn does not know how to become an oak. A piece of leaven cannot even imagine feeding a whole village.

We do not begin by loving God with all our heart and all our soul. We begin by loving our neighbor the way we love ourselves. Notice that Jesus doesn’t just say, love your neighbors. That might leave some wiggle room, as we struggle to think how we can love our neighbors the way we love our spouses or our children or our country.

No, Jesus say, love them the way you love yourself.

And how is that?  How do we love ourselves? And once again we now come full circle. Once again we realize that Christ’s message, here as everywhere, always brings us to the same place. What’s the first thing we notice when we seriously ask, How do I love myself?

I suggest that the first thing we notice is how readily we forgive ourselves. We notice that the thoughts and activities we engage in, which we would find inexcusable in others, appear in an entirely different light when we are the source. We notice how readily excuses come to mind – I was tired, I just wasn’t thinking, I’d had such a rough day, that person deserved everything I said!, and so on and so on.

When it is our own behavior and attitudes that are before the court, we all become world class defense attorneys, establishing our own innocence beyond any shadow of a doubt or, in the worst possible scenario, pleading for mercy on the basis of mitigating circumstances.

I could go on with the analogy, but I hope the point is clear, and I hope it’s one with which we all identify, at least to some degree.

When Jesus asks us to love others as we do ourselves, he’s asking us to willfully extend the same generosity towards them that we do simply by human nature towards ourselves.

Is that the same as loving the Lord your God with all your heart and all your soul and all your mind? Of course not. But what it is is the mustard seed, the bit of leaven, that the spirit of Christ in you can use, and nourish, and cultivate until it becomes the great plant that can shelter others, until it turns into the abundant bread of Christ’s own life, the bread that can feed the whole world, the bread that can even feed, and satisfy, our loving and gracious God, because it has been prepared with a love like God’s own.

And so, loving and gracious God, our prayer for today is that you keep us alert to possibilities in our small everyday lives, not to love you with all our heart and all our mind – for that for most of us is still too daunting a responsibility – but to love our neighbors as we love ourselves, with kindness and sympathy and mercy and generosity. In a word, Father, we pray that you enlighten us to love others with the same forgiveness with which we love ourselves, for that is how Christ Himself loves each one of us, and it is in His name we pray.