

Our Dwelling Place

Psalm 90:1-6, 13-17; Matthew 22:34-46

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

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It probably feels a bit like stating the obvious to say that we live in complex and chaotic times.

For at least the last half-decade (probably more) it has felt to many like that much that was once familiar and predictable and reliable is now teetering or crumbling.

It's a well-known list by now:

- the news of the day (constant drum beat of war, another mass shooting, the seeming inevitability of it all).
- the pandemic and all the fallout from it, which we are still experiencing (from the epidemiological to the social to the political).
- the way in which our various forms of media so often devolve into a war of competing ideologies.
- the way in which trust in institutions like science, government religion, and the media seems to be crumbling.
- the way in which identity has become *everything*. And all the incentives we have to make up who we are from the shards of a broken culture instead of anchoring our identities in God.
- and, of course, the often-cited crises of anxiety, depression, addiction, and loneliness that this is producing, particularly in the West, and particularly among the young (although not exclusively, see the sad news about *Friends* actor Matthew Perry from yesterday).

In the middle of all this, it's natural to wonder, does faith make a difference? What would Jesus have us do and say and be in such a time as this? What words of comfort or challenge or rebuke does Jesus speak into our moment?

If you're anything like me, when things seem complex and chaotic, I seek simplicity.

In the middle of all that I don't understand or all that I struggle to prioritize or all that I can't see, I look for something that can't be doubted, something that everyone should be able to agree on, something that comes straight from the source.

Well, our gospel text this morning is one of those kinds of passages. There are all *kinds* of things in the bible, in the New Testament, in the gospels, even from the lips of Jesus himself that provoke differing opinions and can seem to add to the complexity.

This is not one of them.

Love God. Love your neighbour. All the law and the prophets find their place in this two-pronged command.

Love. It all comes down to love.

So, like many other preachers who saw this passage pop up among the lectionary readings this week, I gratefully seized upon the opportunity to talk about love.

And, like many other preachers today I imagine, I was reminded that while there is indeed a beautiful simplicity to the command to love, and while it does indeed cut through the chaos and complexity of our time (and all times), the command to love is also the deepest and widest and most profound command Jesus could ever give.

Let's set the stage in Matthew's gospel.

Our text comes in the middle of an ongoing dialogue/confrontation between Jesus and the religious leaders of Israel.

When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. "Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?"

In Matthew, this series of confrontations and tests comes after Jesus' entry into Jerusalem, after Jesus' cleansing of the temple, and before his arrest and crucifixion.

These are tense times.

By this point in the story, we've seen a whole host of interrogations of Jesus. We've seen numerous attempts to trip him up and trick him, all kinds of misguided efforts to get Jesus to publicly indict himself and get in trouble.

Given all that we've seen thus far, we could be forgiven for wanting to say to the Pharisees and religious leaders: *You know what, you should probably just stop asking Jesus loaded questions... This isn't going to end well for you.*

We smirk and we snicker at these Pharisees who thought that being a good religious person, a faithful and obedient follower of God, that it involved all these arcane rules and distinctions.

We chuckle as Jesus puts them in their place, cutting through all of their nasty motives with the simple command to love God and love your neighbour.

And we think, "Ah, those silly Pharisees who thought it was all about rules. How wonderful that Jesus shows them that it's really all about love!

And we can feel pretty proud of our exalted understanding... for a second. But I think that if we do this, we make an error.

We sometimes imagine that "love" is a kind of vague, emotional sentiment towards God and others, where if we feel generally well-disposed toward God, and if we feel generally well-disposed to our fellow human beings, and we think nice thoughts about them, and we give a bit of our time and our money to both God and our neighbours, then we're following Jesus' commands, we're on the right track.

But let's pause and just look, for a second, at what Jesus is *actually* asking us to do here.

Jesus is, as always, pushing the Pharisees and the religious leaders of Israel, and *all of us who hear his words*, far beyond a lifeless, obligatory checklist of religious "do's" and "don't's."

He is in fact pushing them (and us!) into the deepest parts of who they are and what they believe about God and challenging them to stop "playing religion" and to give *all of themselves* to God and to each other.

Let's look at the words Jesus uses when he describes what our love for God ought to look like.

Love the Lord your God with all your...

Heart (καρδια; kardiá)

- Denotes the center of all *spiritual* life and all *physical* life
- Refers to the fountain of all desires, appetites, purposes, and endeavours—all of your deepest desires, longings, hungers and hopes
- *Love God with this part of yourself!*

Soul (ψυχή; psuche)

- Breath of life
- Vital force which animates the body
- Seat of feelings, desires, affections, aversions
- One's essence (the "you" that makes you "you")
- *Love God with this part of yourself!*

Mind (διανοια; dianoia)

- Faculty of understanding
- Way of thinking
- *Love God with this part of yourself!*

Now, there's obviously some overlap in the how these words were used and what they meant, particularly between the Greek words for "heart" and "soul."

But the big picture here is obvious enough.

Love God with all of who you are. Love God with the deepest and best parts of who you are. Hold nothing back.

This is far more challenging than following rules. Rules are pretty easy, actually, when compared with this kind of an all-of-life-encompassing love.

Do we love God like this?

Do we stretch our minds toward understanding who God is and what God has done?

Do we bring all of who we are—emotions, desires, affections, aversions, our energy and ambitions, our purposes and endeavours—before God and say:

All of this belongs to you. You are the source of everything good that I want, everything that I can possibly hope for, the source of who I am and what I am destined to be?

And the second is like it: *Love your neighbour as yourself.*

Here, again, it is easy to slide into easy sentimentality and think that Jesus is asking us to simply be more or less decent people.

But love of neighbour is costly. We need only read the Parable of the Good Samaritan for one example of what Jesus has in mind here. Love of neighbour, in this famous story, involved binding up the wounds of and caring for an enemy.

I'm sure we could think of examples closer to home, in our own lives. Who has God placed in our lives that needs this kind of self-denying, other-focused concrete love?

Maybe it's someone in your school or workplace. Maybe it's someone in your own family!

It could be anyone, really, because there is nobody who falls outside this command. Jesus doesn't really give us a "people I don't have to love" category.

Again, we see that the command to love pushes us farther and deeper than the mere observance of rules and regulations.

The command to love does cut through a lot of the theological minutiae. It does speak a word into the chaos and complexity of our time. It does refocus and sharpen our central calling as human beings.

But it's a very specific kind of love that we are called to, and a very specific God.

It is a love and a God that we see most clearly, of course, a few days *after* this conversation with the Pharisees with Jesus hanging on a Roman cross, freely giving himself away for love's sake.

As always, Jesus not only *tells* us what to do, but he *shows* us how to do it, *demonstrates* what it looks like.

This is what it looks like to truly love God and neighbour.

We are not all called to die on Roman crosses for the sins of the world, of course. That was a one-time job!

We are called to lives of humble, sacrificial, obedient love. This is who we are because this is the one who has called us and the one to whom we belong.

I want to end where our service began, with Psalm 90. The first verse of Psalm 90 describes the Lord as our “dwelling place.”

I like this image of God. It suggests images of safety, security, comfort, solidity. Some translations use the word “refuge” instead of “dwelling place.”

Both terms call to mind a place from which to venture out and to return *to*, a safe place to lick one’s wounds, to reflect upon lessons learned, a place to be loved and to learn how to extend love outward.

And of course, as Christians, we interpret all Scripture through the lens of Christ. We unapologetically, and with great respect to our Jewish friends to whom these Scriptures were first given, read Jesus back into the OT.

This is a bold move, but we do it because we are convinced that Jesus shows us the truest and most comprehensive picture of God’s character and God’s nature.

So, we hear a verse like Psalm 90:1-2:

Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations.

And we do something like the following calculation.

God is love.

Jesus is God.

Therefore, the love of Christ has been (and is) our dwelling place for all generations.

It is our refuge, our safety, our comfort, our hope. It is the source of any love that we can manage, whether for God or for neighbour.

It is the inspiration for love. It is the justification for love. Jesus is, we believe, the culmination of all love.

It is only those who are convinced down in their bones that they are loved by God, in Christ, who can begin to love as Jesus loved.

I want to end with a story.

A few weeks ago, at the jail, the guys were forty minutes late arriving for chapel. A code had been called (usually an altercation or medical emergency) which means nobody moves until it's cleared up. So, we had twenty minutes. And they guys seemed a little restless, a little annoyed, a little distracted. What to do?

I decided to scrap the official plan. We read Ephesians 3:18-19:

I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

I followed this up by asking one simple question: "Do you find it hard or easy to believe that God loves you?" The question hung in the air for a few minutes.

A young man to my immediate left broke the silence. He was skinny, soft-spoken, shy. It was his first time in chapel. He spoke with an accent (the name on the sign-up sheet led me to believe perhaps of some West-African extraction?).

"I find it hard to believe this," he said. He held up the bible in his lap. "I read it in this book, but it's just words on a page. How do I know they are true? I don't feel like God loves me."

There were a lot of nods around the circle.

There's a lot I don't know about the guys I see each week. But I know enough to know that very few of them grew up knowing much of love. Abuse, dysfunction of all kinds, instability, neglect, addiction, poverty, revolving doors of adults? Yes, they know of all these things.

Love? Not so much.

“God loves you” sounds different to different ears. Those of us fortunate enough to grow up being well-loved have less trouble transposing this love into the spiritual realm. It makes sense to us that love should be the bedrock reality of the cosmos. Or, at the very least, it’s more plausible.

But those whose primary experience with love has been its absence? Those who have spent years chasing after it down all kinds of destructive dead ends? Well, that’s a different story. “God loves me? Yeah, if you say so, preacher.”

I asked how many of them were fathers. Ninety percent of the hands went up. We talked about how we feel about our kids, about how even when they make dumb decisions, we still love them, how we would do almost anything for them.

“This comes from somewhere,” I said. “That love that we feel, that longing to be loved like that, that ache we get when it’s absent... these are clues to what we were made for.”

“I think it’s more than just words on a page,” I began, “although I can easily imagine that it might feel this way at times. I think that the words on the page and the life of Jesus correspond to something that we all feel inside, something we all long for.”

Our twenty minutes were up, the guards were at the door.

I snuck a quick word in with the young West African man as he was leaving. I thanked him for having the courage to share and said I hoped some of what I said landed.

He smiled. “Maybe. I’m gonna think about it some more.”

I haven’t seen him again. Perhaps he moved to a different unit or a different jail. But I haven’t forgotten his face or his question. And I still pray for that young man.

And what I pray for him is what I pray for myself and what I pray for each one of you. That we would *know* the love of Christ which passes all understanding.

That this love and this God would be our dwelling place — the place from which all our limited attempts to love God and neighbour proceed from.

Love of God and neighbour is not a grim duty that we perform out of some combination of fear and duty. It is our joyful response to the love of God made known most fully in Christ.

We love because he first loved us (1 John 4:19). The order matters. It matters more than anything.

So let us go forth to love, secure in the knowledge that we are loved with an everlasting love, a love that, to quote British author Francis Spufford, “never shudders at the state we’re in.”

A love that is indeed, our dwelling place, our refuge, our heart’s true home.

Amen.

