

*Almighty God, Source of all, Living Word, Holy Spirit:  
may your Word only be spoken, and Your voice only be heard. Amen.*

How's this for a reality show: "Stump the Clergy." A bunch of religious leaders would go through this gauntlet of questioning, and each week one of them would get voted off till only one remained. Kind of sounds like what Jesus was going through in the readings we've had the past few weeks.

First the Sadducees try to trap him into saying something they can use against him, then the Pharisees have at him. Last week the Herodians were in on the game, and the category was: Taxes or Tithes?"

I guess this week the category is "Greatest Commandments," and they'll know if he names the wrong one.

But Jesus is wily – sometimes he asks them a question back that stops them. In today's story, he actually answers the question... but with a twist.

The first answer he gives is right on the money – nobody could argue with it. It's the second part of the *shema*, the central Jewish prayer, that great affirmation of God's one-ness, and our obligation to worship God with everything we have: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.*' Just like we will sing in "More Love, More Power."

So far so good. But then he keeps going, and says the second great commandment is this: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Now this was not in fact a great commandment.

Oh, it's in the Law, the Torah. But it's a minor verse in Leviticus.

Jesus takes this instruction about living rightly with others, not slandering or hating or taking vengeance on our neighbors, and in effect elevates to the status of the *shema*.

Loving God is not an isolated thing – you have to express that by loving what God has created, which includes yourself, and your neighbor.

In effect, this simple commandment addresses the breakdown of love that occurs in the Genesis story of the fall, the beginning of human sin.

As Eve and Adam rebel against God's clear instruction, the immediate consequence is that they feel shame, an emotion they'd never known before; they lie about and blame each other; and they hide from God.

There is a breakdown of love between them and God;  
them and each other, their neighbor; and them and their true selves.  
In elevating this verse, Jesus is signaling that God aims to redeem and restore  
a lot more than just the people of Israel – God is overturning a cosmic curse  
and restoring life. And we are commanded to be a part of that.

And it's hard! Some people love God instinctively; others find it hard, because  
where is God? What does God look like? How can we love someone so remote?  
That's why he sent his Son in human flesh – so we could connect and love Him.  
Some people love themselves very well – and I mean a healthy, humble,  
gracious self-regarding love that honors what's great about us, that honors  
our status as creatures of God, sons and daughters of the Living God.  
But it's really hard to love our neighbor – all of our neighbors.  
Most of us can love some of our neighbors, especially the ones most like us.  
But how about the neighbors we can't understand? Or who offend us?  
Who sow hatred or violence, who damage the earth and its creatures?

This neighbor-loving business is not simple; we have more than one neighbor.  
Israel is our neighbor. Palestine is our neighbor.  
Liberals are our neighbors. Conservatives are our neighbors.  
LGBTQUIA+ folks are our neighbors. Christian Nationalists are our neighbors.  
They are all our neighbors. We don't get to dismiss them, or cancel them.  
We're stuck having to love them. But how? What's the most loving thing?  
When we frame the question in that way, we might actually make some progress.  
“How are we best loving our neighbor?” That's the question to ask in any dilemma,  
not “What's going to make me feel best or safest or least stressed.”  
“What's the most loving thing?”

I like to think of the church as a heart – a pump that takes in tired, anemic blood;  
cleans and refreshes it, and sends out healthy, re-oxygenated blood  
into the whole world. Sending life into the world.  
But the heart doesn't decide where to pump blood. It goes to the whole body.  
The heart does not say, “I won't pump blood to the right hand or the left toe.”  
So, in the same way, we, the church, are invited/commanded to carry rich blood  
to every part of our Body – to ourselves, to our neighbors and to God.  
We don't get to decide not to love ourselves, even if others devalue us.  
We don't get to decide not to love any of our neighbors, even a terrorist.  
We don't get to decide not to love God.

We don't get to decide not to love. Not in theory, anyway... but we do know of times when blood does not get through to some area of the body that needs it. A clot can form; a leg can go to sleep. Why does that happen? Because the flow of blood to that place gets blocked. So it is with the vascular system we call the church – things block the flow of good, rich blood. We call that sin. Sin happens when we focus on what we want or need – and at those moments, we are unable to truly love ourselves, or our neighbor or God. The big "I" is all we see. Sin is artery-blocking plaque. Sin is a massive failure to love. Redemption is the correction of that failure, the holy reversal.

We have been given a remedy for sin – the blood of Jesus Christ, which heals our blood and restores its free flowing to all the places that need it. We have been given a remedy for sin – the power of the Holy Spirit working in us, increasing our faith, our peace, our joy, our ability to focus outward. We have been given a remedy for sin – the love of the Father/Mother God, which enfolds us and restores our self-image and enables us to see others more clearly.

What we most need, when we experience that failure to love, is to remember what it means to be loved, to feel what it means to be loved. "We love, because God first loved us," it says in one of John's letters. We can't love in this "great commandment" way by ourselves. We can only do it with God's love. My friends, we need to be in touch with that love that made us. We can sing "Love is spoken here" all day about but we need to live it, exude it. When we experience God's crazy love in our selves, in our lives, we start to glow with it in a way that other people find irresistible. That's what I want Christ Church to be – a place that others find irresistible because there's so much love flowing here.

We can love in this God-like way, with God's love flowing through us – BUT we need to choose to love. In the most unloving circumstances, we can choose to love. In the face of division, destruction, despair, we can choose to love. In the face of racism, greed, mass shootings, climate change – we have to.

Kathleen Jackson sent around this quote from Bishop Stephen Charleston:

*Is there such a thing as defiant love? I believe so because I feel it. The more the world sinks into struggle, the more intense my love becomes. I defy the headlines from owning history, and against all odds I am determined that mercy and peace shall prevail. I will not give up, go away or be quiet. My love for this Earth and all her people is non-negotiable. My hope, more stubborn still. - Bishop Steven Charleston*

More love, more power. Make that your prayer.  
*Amen.*

### **Leviticus 19:1-2,15-18**

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying: 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. You shall not render an unjust judgment; you shall not be partial to the poor or defer to the great: with justice you shall judge your neighbor. You shall not go around as a slanderer among your people, and you shall not profit by the blood of your neighbor: I am the Lord. You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbor, or you will incur guilt yourself.

You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself: I am the Lord.

### **Matthew 22:34-40**

When the Pharisees heard that Jesus 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?" He said to him, "'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. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."