

Entering the Passion of Jesus
“The Teachings: Risking Challenge”

Matthew 22:34-40

Inspired by Amy-Jill Levine’s book, *Entering the Passion of Jesus*, we continue on our journey through Lent, and this week, we are going to step inside the story of a teacher who turned the world upside down. We are putting ourselves in the picture of Holy Week, taking a closer look and letting the familiar ancient story motivate and inspire us to deeper conviction for the call to follow Jesus, the Great Teacher.

During the week of his final days, Jesus did not just “lay low,” but instead took many risks, including teaching in the Temple. His lessons drew crowds who were astonished at his extraordinary teaching. But, in the audience were some people, like the Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians, who did not like Jesus, for his teaching often posed a challenge and even a threat to them. So, they sought opportunities to trap him and get him to say something controversial.

While Jesus taught on several subjects during Holy Week, today, we are going to focus on his teaching on the Greatest Commandment. The Jewish tradition recognizes 613 commandments, including the Ten Commandments. Recorded in the Old Testament, they are also known as the Law of Moses. Some of the commandments were simple and specific and did not require further explanation. But, some others had to be supplemented and interpreted to be relevant to people of different times and different places. All commandments were important. But, some were considered to have greater weight than others. And over the years, scholars of the law attempted to rank or summarize them.

This is what is happening in today’s scripture reading. One of the Pharisees, a legal expert, asks Jesus, “Teacher, what is the greatest commandment in the Law?” In other words, he is asking Jesus, “Among the hundreds of commandments we have, which one should be the primary code by which all others can be understood?” Jesus gives him a two-part answer, by quoting two scriptures. He says, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands.”

The first commandment Jesus quotes from is found in Deuteronomy, chapter 6. It is the classic Jewish affirmation of loyalty to God. Called the Shema, the Israelites recited it twice a day — once in the morning and in the evening. It was placed in a small container and mounted on doorposts. And it was worn affixed on the arm and head. This way, they were constantly reminded of who they were and to whom they belonged.

These days, some people think loving God is simply feeling an emotion of love for God or even feeling good about the idea of God. But, the biblical understanding of loving God involves more. It involves loving God with all our heart, all our being (or “our soul” in other translations), and all our mind. Heart, soul, and mind are not three small pieces of ourselves — they comprise all that we are, our whole existence. Loving God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind is giving to God everything we are and everything we have. It means more than just giving to God lip service, saying, “I love you.” It means giving to God extravagantly — the best of ourselves, the first fruit of our labor. It means giving to God all of ourselves — our undivided attention, our full devotion and commitment. About this, Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters” (Matthew 6:24).

Levine writes in her book,

If we want to love God with our whole heart, soul and mind and might, we also need to think about how we deal with those moments when we do not feel God’s love, when we, to quote the psalmist, “walk through the valley of the shadow of death” (Psalm 23:4, KJV). We realize that whatever love we may have for God, God’s love for us is even stronger. Jesus again provides the model.

When Jesus prays in Gethsemane, “Let this cup pass from me” (Matthew 26:39), he is showing his tremendous love of God. He shows enough trust that he can say what he thinks. This love of God means that we can be fully honest with God; we can say what is on our hearts and in our minds, no matter how painful those comments may be.

As the numbers of confirmed cases of COVID-19 and deaths around the globe rapidly rise, we can see the fear spreading everywhere around us. Fearful of the unknown and deceived by fake news and rumors, people have been thrown into a panic, buying up everything from toilet paper to rice and ibuprofen. Have you been to a grocery store or pharmacy lately? People are grabbing from the shelves whatever they think they might need, both essential and non-essential items, as if a war is coming, as if there will be no tomorrow!

Caught in this sort of mass chaos, we are all more or less scared. I would be lying if I said, “I am not worried or I am not afraid.” It’s okay to feel the fear. It’s okay to admit that we may have gone a bit overboard with the shopping. The question is, will you continue to allow it to take over and control you. Because by all indications, we will have to live with this for a while. It is our new reality, a new normal. So, whenever you feel overwhelmed by fear, just turn away from your phone, shut off your computer or TV, and try turning to God with whatever you have on your heart and in your mind. Let the love of God cast out the fear and let the peace of Christ fill your heart.

In his response to the legal expert, Jesus then went further and added a second greatest commandment, quoting from Leviticus, chapter 19: “You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.” The first and the second commandments are on level footing and cannot be separated. Loving God and loving our neighbor go side by side. So, one cannot say, “I love God but hate my neighbor.”

In the Gospel of John 13:34, Jesus gives us a new commandment. He says, “I give you a new commandment that you love one another. Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” Levine points out to us that actually, the command to love one another is not new. It’s because in Leviticus 19, we are told to love our neighbors as ourselves as well as the strangers who dwell among us. So, what makes this commandment new is the second part: “Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.” And how is it that Jesus loved us? He loved us to the point of sacrificing his own life for us. It was a love that was more than a feeling. It was a love that risked it all.

Jesus says, “You must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: You must love your neighbor as you love yourself.”

In this world, shaken by the novel Coronavirus, we see many different kinds of reactions and responses to the situation. Some are panic-buying. Some are trying to make a quick buck by hoarding essential health care products and jacking up the prices. Certainly, the stories of such selfish behavior disappoint us. But, there are other kinds of stories that inspire us. We have heard the stories of many doctors and nurses who have volunteered to go into the cities of Wuhan in China and Daegu in South Korea, epicenters of the Coronavirus, to treat the people at the frontlines. They did so fully knowing that they were risking their own health and well-being. Some of them have lost their lives while saving the lives of others. In those cities, non-medical volunteers have cooked and delivered food for medical workers everyday, despite the danger of getting infected themselves. During the lockdown, Christians in China were out on the street, giving out free masks to others along with messages of God's love for all, risking arrest and more.

They carry on a long tradition of Christians taking the life and teachings of Jesus Christ to heart in times of crisis. Dionysus, an early church bishop, had this to say about the Christian response to a plague ravaging the city of Alexandria and spreading across the Roman Empire:

“Most of our brethren showed love and loyalty in not sparing themselves while helping one another, tending to the sick with no thought of danger and gladly departing this life with them after becoming infected with their disease. Many who nursed others to health died themselves, thus transferring their death to themselves. They would embrace the sick, wash and dress them in burial clothes, and soon receive the same services themselves.

The unbelievers were the exact opposite. They pushed away those with the first signs of the disease and fled from their dearest. They even threw them half dead into the roads and treated unburied corpses like refuse in hope of avoiding the plague of death, which, for all their efforts, was difficult to escape.”

Sisters and Brothers in Christ, what shall we do in this present time of trouble? How shall we respond to Jesus' call to love each other as he has loved us? What does loving our neighbor look like right here

in our community? Perhaps it looks like meeting the childcare needs of parents who cannot afford to take time off of work even as our local schools are closing, or doing the grocery shopping and running errands for our elderly and vulnerable neighbors, or creating care packages for those who are in quarantine. Would you join me in praying for the boldness to be the hands and feet of Jesus Christ, that we might have the courage to reflect his love to those who need it most at this time?

Prayer for a Pandemic (Anonymous)

May we who are merely inconvenienced,
remember those whose lives are at stake;
May we who have no risk factors,
remember those most vulnerable;
May we who have the luxury of working from home,
remember those who must choose between preserving their health and making their rent;
May we who have the flexibility to care for our children when their schools close,
remember those who have no options;
May we who have to cancel our trips,
remember those who have no safe place to go;
May we who are losing our margin money in the tumult of our economic market,
remember those who have no margin at all;
May we who settle in for a quarantine at home,
remember those who have no home;
As fear grips our country, let us choose love;
During this time when we cannot physically wrap our arms around each other,
let us find ways to be the loving embrace of God to our neighbors.
Amen.