

Loving God With All We Are

Deuteronomy 6:1-9

February 25, 2011

A few years ago, a radio station ran a contest. The morning DJ invited his listeners to tune in. "Just for fun," he said, "when you wake up to the sound of FM-106, call and tell us the first words you spoke when you rolled out of bed. If you're the third caller, you'll win \$106."

It didn't take long for the contest to grow in enthusiasm. The first morning, the buoyant disc jockey said, "Caller number three, what did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?" A groggy voice said, "Do I smell coffee burning?" Another day, a sleepy clerical worker said, "Oh no, I'm late for work." Somebody else said her first words were, "Honey, did I put out the dog last night?" A muffled curse was immediately heard in the background, and then a man was heard to say, "No, you didn't." It was a funny contest and drew a considerable audience.

One morning, however, the third caller said something unusual. The station phone rang. "Good morning, this is FM-106. You're on the air. What did you say when you rolled out of bed this morning?"

A voice with a Bronx accent replied, "You want to know my first words in the morning?"

The bubbly DJ said, "Yes, sir! Tell us what you said."

"You want to know my first words every morning?"

Thinking this was sounding like it could be something that might be bleep-worthy, the DJ eagerly said, "Go ahead, lay it on us."

The Bronx voice responded, "Shema, Israel ... Hear O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might."

There was a moment of embarrassed silence. Then the radio announcer said, "Sorry, wrong number," and cut to a commercial. (William G. Carter, What to Say When you Roll Out of Bed, esermons.com/Mark12:28-34)

Try to remember. What did you say when you rolled out of bed today? Chances are, those words set the tone for the rest of the day.

For the pious Jew the first words of each morning are always the same, and they were the words spoken that morning on FM-106. They were first spoken by Moses, who said, "Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Teach them to your children and talk about them when you lie down and when you rise" (Deuteronomy 6:6-7).

This morning we're going to conclude our very brief sermon series on the season of love by looking at the Shema of Israel—1/2 of the Greatest Commandment, Jesus once taught. Nathan led us to think about the different kinds of love we have for others in his Valentine's Eve sermon. Last week, with our focus on the Week of Compassion, I had us ponder love as expressed in philanthropy—the loving act of giving on behalf of and in hopes for bettering the human race.

Today, though, I'd like for us to think about what it means to love God.

Have you ever given much thought to loving God? Have you ever even considered the fact that God is waiting for, expecting, wanting our love?

Notice I didn't say God *needed* our love. The Almighty, the Creator of the Universe, does not *need* love to survive.

But in and of Himself/Herself, God is love, and God wants us to live in love with Him/Her. Part of that is by responding to God with love.

What does that way of loving God look like?

The Shema of Israel—the prayer from Deuteronomy that Jesus still lifted up as the Great Commandment—tells us.

“Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and might. Jesus added one more descriptive to this list when he encouraged loving God with all our mind. In essence—love God with all we are.

This morning I’d like to look at how we are called to love God, and invite us to assess how we’re doing personally following the Great Commandment.

First, Love the Lord Your God with all your heart. Even in this most ancient of prayers in history, the writer seemed to understand that the seat of emotion and affection is the heart. Now not everybody in every time agreed with that. Over the ages some have thought that the emotion of love resided in the belly—the stomach—because that’s what churned and seemed to be effected when someone “fell in love.” More recent neurological information tells us that love really resides in the brain—that it is a complicated/chemical process that occurs as a result of many different stimuli from sight, smell, the ambiance of a place that effects mood, etc.

But because most of us don’t want to take the romance out of it, we still claim “I *heart* U” in Valentine’s Cards or see “I *heart* New York” and the like on billboards and bumper stickers.

How do we show God our love? God was pretty clear with Moses and the people of Israel—you offer your love to God love through an act of worship.

Have you ever thought about that before? That the purpose of worship, the reason why you come to worship, is because it is the most profound expression of love to God?

Think about it. When we set aside Sabbath time for contemplation, we give God our precious time so that we can be aware of all that God has done for us in our day, our week, our life. In worship, then, we respond to that awareness by singing our thanks, by shouting and dancing our thanks in some churches, by quietly whispering our thanks in prayer.

The intentional act of coming to worship every week, or in some cases, every day if you're one of my Catholic brothers and sisters, is the tangible symbol that says to the world, "I *heart* God" for it is the heart that is changed, that is healed, that is strengthened by a loving connected relationship. It is a heart that feels broken when there is absence or inattention when we're in a relationship.

According to the law of Moses which Jesus repeated as his Greatest Commandment, worship is the way to love the Lord your God with all your heart.

So how is that different from loving the Lord your God with all your soul? And what is the soul, anyway?

That has been the subject of much research and debate in our Wednesday morning Bible study. Suffice it to say that we believe there is an essence within all of us that is not just made up of matter—that there is a part of us that is connected to God in a mysterious, not physical way, and that is called the soul and/or spirit, depending on if you understand them to be one and the same or not.

To love God with all my soul, for me, is to take the part of me that is also a part of God—that spark of me that was given to me by the breath of the divine, and reconnect with God in prayer. It is through prayer that we have the opportunity to become One with our maker again, to feel in prayer that deep and abiding blessed assurance of God's presence.

So when I take time for prayer, for reconnecting with my God—I am loving my God with all my soul.

When Jesus repeated the Shema as an answer to the question "Which commandment is the greatest of all?" he added the mind to the original list.

Jesus was aware that love means having knowledge about the other—to learn as much as you can about the beloved.

In our own lives, isn't that what happens when we first fall in love? We spend time finding out all we can about the other person—their likes and dislikes, their thoughts and opinions.

So, too, do we show God our love when we continue to learn more about the Holy one. We are able to do that in so many ways—by reading the Bible at home devotionally, or by digging deep in Bible study courses. We learn about God when we are in community with others, by asking them what they know of God, and hearing them tell of some divine aspect we have not experienced yet or thought about.

The more we research, study about our God, the more we show our love for God with all our mind. It took Jesus the Rabbi—teacher—to be aware of that clarification in the original prayer that needed to be added.

Finally, the Shema ends with the admonition to love our God with all our strength/might. This is the action piece of love—the one that brings movement and results. This is the piece of the Shema that is also related to the second half of the greatest commandment that Jesus lifted up in the gospels—that you should love your neighbor as yourself.

Using our strength and might is about showing God love through the work we do on behalf of others—those acts of philanthropy we talked about last week.

So how are you doing showing God your love?

Have you shown God your loving heart in worship?

Have you shown God your loving soul in prayer?

Have you shown God your loving mind by continuing your study of the divine?

Have you shown God your loving strength by the work you do for others?

Sometimes, because we're so busy thinking about the Love WE need, it's easy to forget the fact that we have been called to love God.

We need a little help remembering, don't we.

It's like the couple, both in their 80's who celebrated their 60th wedding anniversary. A news reporter was there to cover the big event and asked the husband, "Tom, what has been the secret to your and Mary Lou's marital success?"

Tom smiled and said, "Well, the answer is on my watch. You see, Mary Lou's father gave this watch to me as a wedding present on the day we were married, and over the years this watch has played a large part in giving us a happy marriage."

The reporter didn't understand until he looked more closely. Inscribed across the face of the watch were the words: "Tom, tell Mary Lou you love her."

Think of that—everytime he looked to see what time it was over all their 60 years together, there was that reminder from his father in law, "Tom, tell Mary Lou you love her"

If we know how easy it is to take our love for granted even for the ones closest to us, it is not hard to imagine why it is difficult to remember to love God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

That's why Moses added this little piece of advice in this morning's scripture—put these words near your frontdoor of your homes so that you'll see them when you go out and when you come in. Put these words on armbands so that when you look down, there they'll be. He even told them to put them in a box called a phylactery on their foreheads so they could remember them.

Whatever works, right?

So—what are you going to do to show your love to God? How are you going to remember?