

March 10th: Command

This Fall we returned to the Narrative Lectionary—a year long collection of readings that take us from the origins of God’s people to the first century world. These readings are chosen on purpose, because they help us trace a particular theme throughout our scripture texts—and this year our theme is “Love in Action.” In each of these passages, there’s a compelling action that is embedded into the narrative, that I want us to be paying attention to and practicing this week. Of course, we know that love is the most important verb of all, so we’ll also be tracing how God’s love was shown to our spiritual ancestors and discover how God’s love is still being shown to us today.

As we study together, I want to remind us that the goal isn’t simply to increase our knowledge of God—the goal is to increase in love towards God and towards each other. The goal is to increase our love in action, this week and every week, so that our world can more and reflect God’s enduring love for all of creation.

Would you pray with me before we dig in?

Loving God, Your care for us knows no bounds, your kindness towards us is endless. In your open arms, we find the peace and wholeness that our broken world cannot provide. Bring our attention to your presence this morning, increase our awareness of your closeness to our bodies and souls. Remind us that our relationships are the true measure of our human lives, and remind us that we are called to love you and love each other with our entire beings. Help us be channels of your grace and goodness this week, we pray. Amen.

I went through a little bit of a sentimental streak this past week, and I rewatched Love Actually for the thousandth time—and because I had this week’s scripture text in the back of my brain, I was once again struck by the opening monologue that Hugh Grant’s character recites. Over a montage of photos and videos of families at the airport, he says this:

“Whenever I get gloomy with the state of the world, I think about the arrivals gate at Heathrow Airport. General opinion’s starting to make out that we live

in a world of hatred and greed, but I don't see that. It seems to me that love is everywhere. Often, it's not particularly dignified or newsworthy, but it's always there – fathers and sons, mothers and daughters, husbands and wives, boyfriends, girlfriends, old friends. When the planes hit the Twin Towers, as far as I know, none of the phone calls from the people on board were messages of hate or revenge – they were all messages of love. If you look for it, I've got a sneaky feeling love, actually ... is all around."

It's a cute opening to this movie, right? Sure, it might feel a little out of touch for us, now that picking up your loved one at SeaTac is like descending to the fifth circle of Dante's Inferno, but I think the optimism and general sentiment is still rather lovely.

And the reason it caught my attention is because I've been thinking a lot about love these days, and wondering if it's still true that love actually is all around. Do most of us feel the love as we go about our daily lives? Do we experience this pervasive sense of love as we navigate our routines and our busy schedules? Do we still believe that love is everywhere, if we only are able to see it?

I'll let those questions percolate a little bit, and we'll come back to them after we dig a little deeper into this familiar passage from the Gospel of Mark–this story of Jesus and his human life.

Today we return to Mark 12, in which our biblical author describes the scenes in the temple courts after Jesus has made his triumphant entry into Jerusalem for the annual Passover celebration. In last week's text, we learned that Jesus confronted the priests and elders using a parable about rejection and violence, and this story not only predicted his death but indicted those who would play a part in it. Through the parable, he reminded the religious elite that they didn't own God or own spirituality, but that they were simply stewards of God's message and stewards of human relationships. As you can imagine, this did not go over so well, and that passage ended with increasing tension between Jesus and his adversaries.

In the later part of this chapter, Jesus is once again conversing with a crowd in the shadow of the temple, and this time one of the teachers of law comes to him with a question. After such a contentious relationship to the religious elite, you might expect that Jesus would treat this teacher of the law with apprehension or suspicion—perhaps with the mindset that this teacher of the law comes to entrap Jesus or trick him, but instead we hear that Jesus welcomes the opportunity for more conversation and answers the man’s inquires honestly and earnestly.

The teacher of the law poses this question, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

Before we take a look at Jesus’ response, let’s give a little context to why this could be a controversial question. First, it is a little unclear exactly what the man is asking—he doesn’t specifically ask Jesus which of the Ten Commandments is the most important, as most of us might assume. Some biblical scholars will point out that in their cultural context, this is the implicit understanding behind the question, but other scholars are quick to argue that by this point in Jewish history the interpretation of those original Ten Commandments had grown into something much more complicated. In fact, after the Ten Commandments were given to Moses, one of the most famous Jewish patriarchs, the people of God spent a lot of time discussing how ten rules was simply not enough.

When the first five books of the Bible—Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy—were finally written down and codified during the time of the Babylonian Exile, the theologians of that day decided that a grand total of 613 laws was the right number. These laws dictated everything from sabbath keeping to ritual sacrifices to household labor. If that sounds pretty confusing to you, that’s because it was—Jews during this time period spent a lot of time debating, deliberating, and writing commentaries on these laws, and the teachers of the law were responsible for making sure that everyone understood how and why these laws were put in place to begin with.

Six hundred and thirteen total commands that Jews were expected to know, understand, observe, and enforce. Even with teachers of the law, can you imagine the confusion? Can you imagine what it would take for the average person to keep all of those restrictions and rules in their mind? Can you imagine what it must have been like for faithful Jews to follow each and every one of these commandments day in and day out?

Well, I have some idea, because this week I tried to look up the Revised Code of Washington State and find out how many laws we have on our books, and I discovered that if I wanted the whole, definitive list, I would have to order a 130 volume set, which is updated annually. Just the index alone is 806 pages, and yes I downloaded it to check.

So maybe only 613 laws sounds pretty good? I guess you can be the judge.

Anyway, Jesus does have a response to the religious leader's question. Verse 29 says this: "The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.'"

Last week we heard that Jesus referenced Psalm 118 in his parable, and we find here that he responds in a similar manner. Despite all of the conflict that he's encountering, and all of the anger that is directed at him from the spiritual establishment, we hear in these verses that Jesus is a good and faithful Jew. He knows his scripture, including this quotation from Deuteronomy chapter 6, which is known as the "Shema." The "Shema" or "Shema Yisrael," is the core affirmation of Judaism, it is the prayer that is most utilized in Jewish theology and practice, recited in daily rituals and used as a decoration for places of worship. In fact, the title "Shema" comes from the first line of the verse from Deuteronomy, it literally means "to hear." However, in a more spiritual way, the word "shema" also means "to observe" or "to obey" or to take action. And this is important, because Jesus goes on to say that this idea of being compelled into action is central to these divine commandments.

Jesus continues, "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength."

This again comes from Deuteronomy and the Shema, and we see that in this conversation with the religious leader, Jesus has tied together this idea of God's identity, God's "one-ness," and a command to love God with our whole selves. We see that Jesus names all of these body parts—our hearts, our souls, our minds, our strength—and unites them in a singular task: love. The unity, the one-ness of our being is commanded to respond to the one-ness of God's being with love.

But Jesus isn't done with the teacher of the law just yet. He recites one final piece of scripture, this time from Leviticus 19, saying, "The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

When we think about Jesus' answers, it might help us to remember that in choosing these two commands—love God and love others—he deliberately didn't choose 611 other laws. Out of all of the laws on the books, he didn't choose commandments about murder (which might have been pretty appropriate considering he was about to be killed), he didn't choose the commandment about bearing false witness (again, which might have been timely considering Judas' upcoming betrayal), and he didn't reference laws surrounding worship and sacrifices (which might have been made sense considering he was on temple grounds). He doesn't say anything about rules against idolatry, although that could be considered a pretty big deal. He doesn't tell the religious leader that there's a specific belief that one needs to have. Instead, we hear Jesus say that the most important commandment is one that puts love into action.

We might still be suspicious of the religious leader, but our story tells us that the man appears to be impressed by Jesus' answers. He affirms what Jesus has just taught, responding, "You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." This particular teacher of the law agrees with Jesus—it all comes down to love.

I think many of us have heard this passage before, or we're at least familiar with this idea of loving God and loving our neighbors. We might listen to this story, and appreciate the reminder that God isn't about burnt offerings or sacrifices, or temples, or perfect rituals—because sometimes our culture, and yes, even our church culture, can prioritize the wrong things. We might appreciate the reminder to focus on love, rather than focusing on things like complicated theology, doctrine, or rules.

But if I'm honest, the way this story is typically told feels a little unresolved for me, especially if we just stop here. Maybe it's just me, but it feels a little trite if we just say, "love is the answer!" Because the truth of the matter is that loving God and loving others can be harder than it sounds. Sure, loving kittens is easy. Loving a sleeping newborn is easy. But loving your neighbor? That gets messy, real fast.

The opening scene of *Love Actually* might be cheesy and a little bit cliché, but this rewatch reminded me that love isn't all sunshine and rainbows. Romantic relationships require compromise and communication, parenting requires almost a superhuman amount of patience and endurance, friendships can be tested by shifting priorities and different life stages. We hurt each other, we go back on our commitments, we do real harm to each other even if we don't mean to.

So if I was in a conversation with Jesus, I'd want to ask him: what do we do when love is hard? How do we love when our spouse left their socks on the floor for the fifth time this week? How do we love when our kids have a meltdown right before dinner is supposed to be on the table? How do we love when our neighbor won't stop blasting music as they mow the lawn at 6am? How do we love when somebody cuts us off in traffic? How do we love when our coworkers get on our last nerve? How do we love when our partner eats the last of the ice cream that you were saving as a special treat at the end of a long week? How do we love when a friend disappoints us?

If love is our most important command, what do we do when love seems like the most difficult action we could possibly take?

As I was trying to come up with an answer to these questions, I came across this quote from columnist and lawyer David French. He wrote:

“The biblical call to Christians to love your enemies, to bless those who curse you, and to exhibit the fruit of the spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control—does not represent a set of tactics to be abandoned when times are tough but rather a set of eternal moral principles to be applied even in the face of extreme adversity.”

Love. Even in the face of extreme adversity. That’s what Jesus models for us. That’s the command that Jesus has for his disciples. That’s what Jesus invites us into as we walk this path of faith. And step by step, we’ll find the courage and strength that this kind of love requires.

My friends, I don’t think we have to have it all figured out today, I know that I won’t. Today is just one day on the journey, one more day that we can choose love even if it feels hard. The adversity that we face or the frustrations of our days won’t go away, and in fact it might get harder to love each other as our culture tries to push us further and further apart, but we can resolve to try again tomorrow. It might get more and more difficult to love each other in a world that seems to profit from our polarization, but like Hugh Grant, I have hope that hatred and greed won’t win the day if we look for ways to love like Jesus.

And then, I have faith that love actually will be...all around.

Amen.