

All Our Hearts: Reflecting on Mar 12:28-34
Reebee Kavich - November 5, 2000

We're going to take an extra minute after the anthem during which I invite you to think about a time when you have loved God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. A "How Great Thou Art" moment when your soul cried out in songs of praise to God. If a moment from your own life doesn't leap immediately to mind, perhaps think of one from someone else – an artist or a writer for instance. Though I won't necessarily call on you now, I'd love for you to share with me some of these moments after the service.

Anthem
Sermon

Do you have a moment in mind? Keep the feeling that it evoked with you if you can as I talk about this commandment. I'll share with you an experience that I'd call my "How Great Thou Art" moment. My sophomore year in college, my room looked out over the playing fields. One hot May night, there was a *huge* thunderstorm. The sky was dark and cloudy, the thunder was rolling, the rain was pounding the field. I looked out and had an overwhelming sense of the presence of God. God was out there in that sky, on that field. So I ran outside, barefoot, down the hill and onto the field. I danced around, screaming, laughing, worshipping, and loving God. In that moment, I was loving God with all my heart and all my soul, and all my mind and all my strength. There, on the field, I was shouting out I love You, God.

I'm not suggesting that this is the way everyone should or does express love to God – hey, I really shouldn't have been dancing around in an open field in the middle of a lightening storm. But when I read Jesus' words about loving God in this morning's passage, these are the kinds of moments I think about. BIG moments of praise and *passion*. Wow moments. Moments to be treasured and remembered for ever. However, these are brief, isolated moments in life. Is this what it means to fulfill this the greatest commandment? When we have these moments, we are loving God. But to truly do what Jesus is asking would be to love our God with all our hearts and souls and minds and strengths in every moment of every aspect of our lives. Loving God has to happen in the in-between times, too. Loving God has to happen day to day, in the normal times of our lives, Monday thru Saturday as well as Sunday, November 5 as well as December 25, in the church's 'ordinary time' as well as on Easter.

I'm sure you're aware that Jesus did not pull this greatest commandment out of thin air, as it were. It is a quote of the text of the first commandment given by God to Moses at Mt. Sinai. It was written on the stone tablets on which Jewish laws were first recorded. So when Jesus spoke these words calling them the greatest commandment those who listened recognized these core words of the Jewish faith and we recognize the core of Christian faith. If you are a faithful person, and you believe in Yahweh, in the Lord our God, the first act of that faith is to love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. Indeed perhaps faith in God is synonymous with that love. For as H.H. Kelly said, "Love is not a thing you do or come to. It comes to you, overcomes you...Where faith meets hope, love is born." (Quoted in *Anchor Bible: Mark*, pg. 480)

The action of loving is not one we need to invent. Love is not new to God. God, our creator, created also love. Love is at the center of God and is fundamental to how God interacts with the world. As Carter Heyward puts it, "God's power is the power of love." (*Saving Jesus* 157) When we are created as children of God we receive God's love and we are endowed with

the *ability to love* and the *motivation to love*. God loves us into being, God loves us into loving. So when we love God with all our hearts, we do so *in response to* the love that God pours forth upon us.

Love is present at our beginnings. Loving God is responsive – God is the source of love and loving God is responsive. We can love God because we are first loved by God. And yet...loving God is not merely saying Thank You. Certainly thanksgiving and praise are crucial ways that we love God. These are the moments when we run out into the rain and dance, when we sit in a quiet place and write love poetry to God, when we worship together, when we stand in the woods watching the snow fall and praising God's creative power. These are wonderful moments! They are powerful expressions of our love to God! But moments in isolation by definition do not engage all our hearts, all our souls, all our minds, all our strength. That's one way of interpreting the scribe's reply: "this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." Such offerings and sacrifices were part of the worship pattern of second temple Judaism. These moments were some of the wow moments, if you will, these were the "How Great Thou Art" moments of the community. But to love God in an all way – to love God *always* would pervade the rest of one's life as well. Which is, I should add, reflected in the practice of Judaism then and now - the laws of everyday are followed in such a way as being acts of loving God and being God's people in every moment.

Loving God should pervade our existence. And hence rather than ending with the first commandment (which was after all, the only thing the scribe asked him), Jesus lifts up a quote from Leviticus as the second greatest commandment: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." How, if loving God pervades everything and is supposed to be done with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength, how is there room to love our neighbor?

It is because loving God is not isolated in these wow moments. Loving God takes more than one step, faith is more than one step. We must love our neighbor as ourself. Loving God may precede this, and loving ourself may precede this, too. But it precedes it, sets the stage for it, prepares for it. Loving God equips us to love our neighbor. Loving God pervades our love for our neighbor. Loving our neighbor comes in response to receiving the love of God, and is an extension of, an expansion of, loving God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength. We see in our neighbor the image of God and we love our neighbor as the creation of God that she is. So when we love our neighbor we love God.

Loving our neighbor has its wow moments, too, when everything clicks and two people connect in a sparkling new way. It can be euphoric and the reaction in us is sometimes a little like running out into the rain to dance. When we help a child to grow physically or emotionally or spiritually, it is like watching God's creative power at work. When we finish some major project developed out of love, there are shouts of Hallelujah! But loving our neighbor, like loving God, happens in the in between moments, too. Love is not always euphoric, not always smooth. Sometimes persisting in love – love of neighbor, love of self, love of God – does not fill us with joy. But to love in an all way, to love always, means to be constantly engaged with God, to be constantly seeking ways to love your neighbor. Even when a relationship between two people ends – whatever unreconcilable differences, offenses or abuse cause a divide between them – they are both still children of God. They are both still neighbors, and on this fundamental level they are still called to love one another even when living together is no longer possible. Our acts of loving come out of the love we receive from God, and that love is constant and true. So we cannot let go of love even when we are troubled, because we know that neither will God

let go of God's love for us. Sometimes the human relationship ends, but the love should remain – as we and our neighbors always remain beloved children of God.

The Bible talks about the persistence of love with some frequency and I want to touch on three such passages. In Ruth, some of the most famous words on acting out love appear. In the midst of hardship, with the opportunity to escape, Ruth chooses to stay with Naomi. She says to Naomi, "Where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge, your people shall be my people, and your God my God." Ruth expresses her love for Naomi and speaks her commitment to continue to act out her love through her presence. This passage, about a relationship between a mother-in-law and daughter-in-law is so powerful a statement on the persistence of love that it is often read at weddings. First Corinthians 13 takes a more direct approach, defining love: "Love is patient, love is kind...It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." There is great joy in these words, but also a groundedness: this passage does not deny hardship but tells us that in the midst turmoil, love can weather the storm. Love never ends.

Finally, in this morning's passage there is alongside with the commandment to love your neighbor, and example of love between neighbors: in this case, the scribe and Jesus. Now this is a meaning that I didn't catch until I read one of the commentaries on this passage. As you probably have gathered, there is a little tension between Jesus and the scribes. But this scribe and Jesus are in dialogue: the scribe asks a question and Jesus answers. The scribe considers it carefully and agrees that it reflects his faith. Jesus then affirms the scribe, saying, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." The New Interpreter's Bible reflects on the interaction this way: "Because they join together in the conviction that there is no commandment greater than the love of God and neighbor, they are able to treat each other as neighbors." (Vol. 8, p. 679)

If you love God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, there will be wow moments and there will be times in between. There are times when loving God and loving our neighbor is pure joy and we cannot help but to love our God with all our heart. But if it were always so – if we could never help but to love – then to do so would not have been made part of the law. Jesus would not have had to tell us that loving God and loving our neighbor are the two greatest commandments.

Do you still have that moment I asked you to think of in mind? If so, keep holding on to it. Let that moment strengthen and inspire you in those in-between moments and in moments of turmoil. Jesus tells us to love God with all our hearts, and with all our souls, and with all our minds, and with all our strength. Jesus tells us to love God in an all way, to love God always. Then all that we do must begin from the point of loving God. When we encounter our neighbor, we must see them as beloved of God and we must act toward them in a way that reflects our love of God. So find the "How Great Thou Art" moments and revel in them. And in the in between moments, let all you do be inspired by love.

Love, always.

Amen.