

Sermon: Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost, Proper 25, Year A
Matthew 22:34–46
By the Rev. Alfredo Feregrino
St. Luke's ~ San Lucas Episcopal Church
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We have probably all had the experience of being forced to deal with someone we do not like at all. Someone who is unpleasant or unkind to us for some unknown reason. Does this sound familiar?

So, I will tell you one of my stories.

Many years ago, there was a person in my life whom I simply could not stand. Every time we interacted at my workplace, I would get butterflies in my stomach. Perhaps you can think of someone like that right now in your own life.

So, one day, I decided to do something different. I decided to pray for this person and send love. Lots of love.

And I prayed for that person despite my feelings. It was really difficult to do. I felt vulnerable, and sometimes it seemed almost impossible to extend my love to someone who, I thought, made me feel so uncomfortable.

But prayer became the instrument through which the love of God entered the picture. And in the process of prayer, I was surprised to discover that something began to change. The energy and chemistry between us shifted, and after a relatively short time, our relationship changed for the better.

But what surprised me the most was the awareness and realization that perhaps the person who needed to change was not necessarily the other person, but me. I had not fully recognized or allowed the divine healing love within me to transform the way I saw this person.

And I share this story with you because I believe this story connects well with the Gospel we just heard today.

The importance of God's love is at the very heart of today's Gospel.

In this passage, Jesus is questioned by a Pharisee, an expert in the law, about which is the greatest commandment in the Torah. This was not an innocent question. In the previous passages, we see that the chief priests, elders, Sadducees, and Pharisees have been asking Jesus difficult questions designed to challenge his authority and find something they could use against him.

And Jesus replies, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind."

These words come from the book of Deuteronomy (the fifth book of the Tanakh, or the Hebrew Bible) and are part of the central Jewish prayer called the Shema, which in Hebrew means "Hear," as in "Shema Israel," or "Hear, O Israel." The Shema is one of the main expressions of faith in Judaism, reminding God's people of their relationship with God and their commitment to love God with their whole being.

But the interesting point here is that when the expert in the law asks Jesus for one commandment, Jesus responds with two.

The second commandment is: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself," from the book of Leviticus.

And Jesus says, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

In other words, the great commandment to love God is inseparably connected to the commandment to love our neighbor.

We cannot first love God and then, as a completely separate task, love our neighbor. To love God is to love our neighbor, and loving our neighbor is one of the ways we express our love for God.

We cannot say, "I love God," while remaining indifferent to our neighbors or unconcerned about their needs.

Why not? Because we are all part of God's creation, and every human being carries the dignity of being created in God's image.

We cannot love God without loving what God loves. We cannot love God while excluding, rejecting, or oppressing those whom God also loves.

And I think this is something we need to hear, especially in the world in which we live today.

We live in a society where it seems increasingly easy to divide people into categories. People who think like us and people who do not. People who share our beliefs and people who believe differently. People we are willing to welcome into our lives and those we would rather keep at a distance.

Sometimes, without even realizing it, we begin to believe that loving our neighbor means loving only those with whom we feel comfortable.

But Jesus invites us into something much deeper.

And perhaps the question we need to ask ourselves is: What does it really mean to love our neighbor? How do we know when we truly love someone?

I can say that I love my family, friends, my neighbors, and the people in my community, but how do I know that I truly love them?

Do I take the time to listen when someone needs to be heard? Do I reach out to someone who is lonely or going through a difficult time? Am I willing to offer kindness and compassion to someone who may see the world differently from me? And perhaps more importantly, am I willing to make room in my heart for someone I find difficult to love?

And what about our congregation? How do we show love to one another here at St. Luke's ~ San Lucas?

In our society today, it can be difficult to understand the deeper meaning of the kind of love Jesus is talking about. Our culture often associates love with intense emotions, romance, or affection. But that is not necessarily the biblical meaning of love.

In ancient (Koine) Greek, there are several words associated with love, including eros, philia, and agape.

The word used in this Gospel is agape, a love that seeks the good and well-being of others. It is a generous, self-giving love that is not dependent on what we receive in return. It is a self-giving commitment to seek the well-being of others through compassion and kindness.

Agape is the love Jesus is referring to when he speaks about these two commandments, a love that reflects the very nature of God.

Everything God does flows from God's love. God is the source of love, and we are invited to become instruments through which that love becomes visible in the world.

And this is important because love is not simply something we feel. Love is something we do.

Our actions reveal our love. Love means doing something specific and tangible for others, with compassion, respect, and a recognition that we belong to one another.

It means recognizing that your sorrow is also my sorrow, and your joy is also my joy. It means understanding that we are part of one body, connected through God's love.

And this divine love is not limited to the people we prefer or to those who belong to our particular group. It is a commandment that includes everyone.

But let me clarify something. Loving our neighbor does not mean that we must agree with everyone or accept every behavior. We can love someone and still disagree with them. We can love someone and establish healthy boundaries. Love does not require us to ignore injustice.

Rather, love invites us to recognize the dignity of every person, even when our relationships are difficult.

And this is something that connects beautifully with our Episcopal tradition.

In our Baptismal Covenant, we make a promise to "seek and serve Christ in all persons, loving your neighbor as yourself."

Notice that we do not promise to seek Christ only in the people we like or only in those who agree with us. We promise to seek and serve Christ in all persons, as I have preached before.

And when we are asked if we will do this, our response is, "I will, with God's help."

I love that response because it reminds us that loving others is not always easy, and we cannot always accomplish it through our own efforts. We need God's help. We need to allow God to transform our hearts.

And perhaps this is what I discovered many years ago when I began praying for that person at my workplace. I was not simply asking God to change the other person. Without realizing it, I was allowing God to change something within me.

And I wonder what would happen if we approached our relationships with that same openness.

So, I wonder, are you aware of God's presence when you love the people you care about the most?

And let me ask you a question from a different perspective.

I wonder, what about the people you do not know or do not particularly like? How does love manifest itself in those relationships?

Can we take the risk, even in our vulnerability, of approaching another person with love? The same love that inspired Jesus to eat with outcasts, reach out to those who were rejected, and embrace those who were powerless?

Can we offer a prayer for someone who has been unpleasant or unkind to us?

As we gather around this table for the Eucharist today, I invite you to think about someone in your life whom you find difficult to love. Perhaps someone with whom you disagree, someone who has hurt you, or someone who has disappointed you.

And perhaps this week, you might offer a prayer for that person. Not necessarily asking God to change them, but asking God to help you see them differently.

Because when Jesus invites us to love God with all our heart, all our soul, and all our mind, and to love our neighbor as ourselves, he is inviting us into a different way of living.

A way of living in which God's love becomes visible through our relationships, our actions, and our willingness to recognize Christ in one another.

So, I invite you to recognize the divine healing love already present within you.

Allow that love to embrace you, to transform you, and to shape the way you see the world.

And perhaps, just as I discovered many years ago, you will be surprised by what God can do when we open our hearts to that divine love.

Amen.

A Note from the Preacher

Because sermons are meant to be preached and therefore prepared with emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., they are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.