

Sermon Text: Matthew 22:34-46

A small town newspaper carried this misprint in large, titled type. It said, “Two Persons Hurt in Route 9 Crash. Taylors Woman Suffers Consciousness.”

Sooner or later, God’s word will become crystal clear in a way that will force major changes in your heart, in your mind, in your soul, in your life. Hearing just a little of God’s word here and there can inoculate you to the fact that we all need to change. Two things, Jesus is the example of the direction we should be changing toward, and God’s spirit is real and available and necessary for us to grow and change and love and forgive as Jesus did. One day, we may suffer from consciousness, and then the crisis. The crisis to change or to ignore the crystal clear disparity between our selfish definition of love and God’s word made flesh, God’s love lived out in Jesus Christ.

A retiring United Methodist minister, I don’t have my glasses on, maybe he’s here today, preached his last sermon, and was saying goodbye to his congregation, and he walked over to an elderly man who never, ever missed a Sunday during the whole time the pastor was there. The retiring pastor shook his hand, and he said, “Mr. Smith, you are one of the most faithful church members that I have ever known. I know that you haven’t missed a single service in all the years I have been here, and I want to thank you. Now, what is the secret for your being here rain or shine, good weather or bad, whether or not you felt like it?” The old man replied, “Well, every Sunday morning when I woke up, I just kept telling myself that one of these days you were bound to preach a decent sermon, and I did not want to miss it.”

Now, a good sermon cannot be heard for someone else. A good sermon contains all of the Gospel, and that means it will confront, it will convict, and then it gives comfort and promise and inspires us to grow. I hope this sermon does all of these.

Jesus defines in this Scripture the two directions to grow, closer to God and closer to each other. This is no throw away platitude. Jesus said all the law and all the prophets hang on this. This is big! After attending church one week, President Lincoln was asked what he thought of the preacher’s sermon, and he said, “Well, it was almost a great sermon. It lacked only one thing. The preacher did not ask us to do anything.” He did not ask us to do anything! Faith, if it is faith, does two things. Faith knows God and makes God known. Knows God and makes God known. There is no secret faith! There is no private faith! Faith connects us to God and connects us to each other. Like it or not, there are no Christian hermits, no solitary Christians, no way to pray the Lord’s Prayer properly unless you have two or more to begin with “Our Father” and “forgive us” and “lead us” and “deliver us”.

In this Scripture, Jesus boils down 39 books, a few thousand years of history of wrestling with God, to love God and love your neighbor. Now, you may remember that wrestling with God is the definition of the name Israel. The Rabbis of Jesus’ time had meticulously gone through the first five books of the Bible, only the first five, and by their count, they

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found 613 individual statutes in the law, and they took these hundreds of commands, and they attempted to rank them in order. That shows you that Bible study, if you do it to argue, if you do it to justify yourself, if you do it as an academic exercise can be a wonderful waste of time. Can you imagine the debate ranking the 613 statutes? What fun! What arguing! What a waste!

These lawyers were trying to draw Jesus into that debate. “Which is the greatest?” they asked. Jesus answered with the oldest and most orthodox of all Jewish Scriptures, the defining Scripture of Judaism. It was not a new thing. It’s from Deuteronomy, the 6th chapter. It is called now the Shamash. Shamash Israel adonai elohenu adonai. It means, “Hear oh Israel! Listen up Israel! The Lord, our God, is one! There is one God, our God, listen up!” It continues, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might.” That’s part one of Jesus’ answer. Part two is you have to love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. Now you remember, Jesus said earlier in Matthew, in the fifth chapter, “Do not think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have not come to abolish the law and the prophets. I have come to fulfill them, to show you what a life lived in God’s will looks like.” You see, all you have to do is love God totally and unconditionally, with all you are and all you have. That’s part one, and part two is to love your neighbor as much as you love yourself. That’s all you have to do. By the way, you will need God’s help to do these things.

Of all the possible negative Thou Shalt Nots, Jesus lifted up these two positives, and then he said something new and profound. He said that every bit of the law and the prophets hang on these two. 80% of your Bible is the Old Testament, and all of it hangs on these two. Now, he has taken their dissection of the Scripture into bits to argue over, and he has gone the other way, and homogenized, and come up with one overarching theme, “Love God.” That is inseparable from love of neighbor, your neighbor, who by the way, is created in the image of the God you say you love. Love of God and love of neighbor are inseparable. You may disagree, but I do not believe that you can have one without the other. If it is true love, then it comes from God, and if it is true love, God will send you out to neighbor. You cannot read the New Testament, and hate your neighbor, nor even your enemy, nor can you reduce the faith of Jesus Christ to mere belief or mere words.

There is a sort of a poem that I ran across that says, “Not to love is to deny who we are. Not to love is to lose the joy of living. Not to love is to merely exist without meaning or purpose. Not to love is to deny the presence of God, the image of God within us. Not to love is a form of atheism.” Not to love is a form of atheism. You and I were created for relationship. It is built into every fiber of our being. I read years ago of the Failure to Thrive syndrome in infants. It was noted first, I believe, in infants in orphanages in the former U.S.S.R. where otherwise healthy infants simply did not grow, and some even withered and died apparently because they were never held, almost never touched. As difficult as it is, we were made to love and be loved, connected to God and to each other and all of the other ‘each others’ created in God’s image, and that means every single one

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on this planet. We sometimes try to narrow the definition. That's been tried already. You remember in the Gospel of Luke the man who said, "Now Jesus, just who is my neighbor?" Now tell me just who is my neighbor. I don't want to love anybody I don't have to. That's when Jesus told the Good Samaritan story about worshipful, orthodox, Scripture-quoting Jews, who passed by the man bleeding in the ditch, and Jesus made the Samaritan, the heretic with the bad theology and only a fracture of Bible knowledge, the hero of the story. Why was he the hero? Because he stopped and he helped. He had compassion, and he proved to be the brother to the man in the ditch. Jesus did that. He told that story. It promoted compassion over proper theology.

From First John we hear this, "If anyone says I love God, and hates his brother, he is a liar, for he who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. Gandhi, Mahatma Gandhi, once said that he would have become a Christian if it were not for the Christians he met. He would have become a Christian if it were not for the Christians he met. He was aware of the tragic separation between our theology and our practice. Others can witness our witness in only one way, and that is by living out the love of God. Talking it will do no good unless the truth of the words rings true in our daily lives. This is hard. This is why our faith must sometimes be worked out in fear and trembling. Jesus, when he said to love God and neighbor as self, was not saying anything really new, except the new part was he lived it. I have found in Bible studies and in men's groups that men especially turn off when they hear the word love. We do. We think it's a mushy sort of girly word. We do, but that's not it. When you think of love, think of the cross. Think of giving yourself for another even when it costs. It has nothing to do with mushy feelings. It is a choice to do what is good and helpful and healing for another, even for your enemies. We need to be clear on this. As Jesus hung on the cross, WE WERE HIS ENEMIES. Jesus showed us two things in His life and in His death; what a life lived in God's will looks like and how we hate to be told that we need to change. In other words, in Jesus we see God's will lived out and we see our need for a Savior all at once. He lived God's will, and the world despised Him. He called us to repent of ritualized, self-serving religion, and he called us to love each other instead. As He commanded, "Love one another as I have loved you."

I want to tell you about a witness of this. Last week, a former pastor and friend of mine, Joe Sowell, died. One Christmas Eve, now this was Christmas Eve, he let his family go off to North Carolina, and he stayed back in Gramley so that he could serve communion to me and my in-laws and my family during a time of tremendous tension and division between us. Joe stayed behind so he could serve as presiding pastor, and let me commune and try to make peace in a difficult, difficult extended family situation. I'm never going to forget his sacrifice and his willingness to do it. You see, he was retired, and he had no official duty to me or to preside in my appointment, but that's part of the point. When do you get to retire from compassion? When do any of us arrive fully mature and perfect in our Christian faith? When have you loved enough, cared enough, forgiven enough, believed and understood enough to just sit back and not grow anymore, not change anymore, not do anything new in the name of Christ forever again. Jesus' definition of faith involves us connected to Him as the vine, and we producing good

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fruits, good works in His name. When you understand the action of love God took in Jesus Christ, we are obliged to act accordingly to others, to take up our cross, to love even when others are unloving to us. I cannot stop at solving my alienation from God, and ignore others. Salvation as a word in Greek also means healing. God in Christ heals us inside our souls and outside in our lives and in our time and in our talents and even in our pocketbooks. We are healed, and we are saved for God and for God’s use in healing others. Christ died for you, yes, and that is good news, but not only for you, but also for the sins of the whole world. If your faith stops with you, and deals only with eternity and not compassion on real people, here and now, you have only a part of the Gospel message. Life here matters, too. What you do here matters, too. In our Christian witness, in our outreach, Jesus’ debate with the Pharisees and especially with that Good Samaritan story, made it abundantly clear that proper doctrine is meaningless without a healed life connected to God and sent out in love to others.

Irony of ironies, I spent two hours this week at the YMCA the other day, and I was listening with ear buds on to my little portable MP3 player to a book, listening for two hours to a book on how to teach men and women to communicate with one another. Now, did you hear me? I was listening to book. I was in several different rooms filled with men and women with earphones on, listening to a book teaching me how to teach others to communicate! I did not say one word to one soul the whole time I was there. Later, God sort of struck me with the silliness of that. More than half of the ones there also had on earphones. I’ve seen these ideal, happy family advertisements lately for new cars that show mother and father in the front, Dad with a little phone thing in his ear, Mom with a MP3 player in her ear, and kid #1 with a DVD player with headphones, kid #2 with a DVD player with headphones, and this is supposed to be a positive ad to sell that car! Look, you don’t have to talk to each other ever again! They’re all smiling! Even in the church it can be that way unless you get involved in smaller groups like the men’s club or the youth groups or the women’s circles or a Sunday School class where you can share and be known. We need to be connected to one another.

Jesus of the Bible will not allow Himself or His teaching to be reduced to a warm, mushy feeling. Do you love God, he’s asking, and do you love other people, he asks. Then, don’t bother telling me how you feel about them. Tell me what you are doing for them, how you are listening to them. Love is something you do. Love is the example of washing feet I gave you, says Jesus. It is made clear – the limits of love – when you see the cross. There are no limits! The Gospel cannot be boiled down to mere belief and isolated salvation. Scripture will not allow that. Jesus’ parables’ encounters were filled with healing and forgiving and touching and compassion. That is what He lived. That is what we are called to live, and that is where we run into problems because we define love as too small and too narrow to make a difference, or we go the way of the Pharisees, and we define God’s will into mere words, and we repeat them, and we feel righteous, and we go about our business, touching no one and allowing no one to touch us, lost and lonely as ever. Now, there is a third way. The way of conviction. Conviction, an old-fashioned word, it is when you see the difference between your life and the life that Jesus lived, and you understand that you are not what God intended, and you cannot be what God wants

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you to be unless you turn completely around to God, and turn yourself completely over to God, and say, “Lord, forgive me, Lord, heal me, Lord, save me from this emptiness, I know there is more than this. I know there is more than this. Lord, remake me, remold me, touch me, wrap your arms around me so I can truly live.” That is faith, and that is why we sing of joy, and when we do that, God sends us out to each other.

Love is a verb. Faith is also a verb. There is also doing along with the believing. There is also doing along with saying the words, “I love you.” There are always other people involved, and they are not always easy to love, or forgive, or even care for. That is why we need God’s help to live this faith of ours, and that is why God’s spirit is available in every moment, just a prayer away. If we dare call ourselves Christians, we will boldly turn again and again to God for help to love, and in the process, we will find God nearer and nearer. Faith is a journey, a sojourn, not a statement. Remember, God’s word does not become faith until it becomes flesh. God’s word does not become faith until it becomes flesh in our lives. Which brings us back to baptism. We promised to this young child, as a church, to be loving as an example in an unloving world. We promised that! We promised to each other to be a refuge for all who are seeking comfort and care. We promised. We promised to God and to all who are baptized to love God and to reflect God’s love in the world as an act of faith and hope.

Now, some of you may say on the way out, some of you may say, “Pastor, that was a wonderful sermon.” I’m going to be thinking, “That remains to be seen.” It depends on what we do differently. May you all suffer consciousness. May you all suffer from complete consciousness that Jesus did say, “Love God with all your heart, and then love your neighbor as yourself. I command you.” Faith requires it, and God will give us the power to produce good fruit in our lives as we struggle, as we grow, as we reflect the love God has made known in Jesus Christ, made known to us not just for our benefit, but made known for the others around us, through us. Let us love as Christ loved. Amen.