

I want to do a little theology with you today, I want for us to do a little thinking about God. I want to dust off and perhaps rearrange some of the furniture in our minds. This really is pretty much the message behind most sermons on the Gospels because it is what God is saying to us and hoping that we understand and follow. This morning we hear Jesus asked by a scribe what the most important law is. Scribes were basically lawyers and he wanted to be clear about the Jewish laws and what they demanded. Jesus responded pretty simply with what is the bedrock of our faith, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind. This is the first and great commandment, and the second is like it; You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.” The truth is that if we understand what Jesus said here, we understand why Jesus came among us and what God’s desire for his people is all about.

The first commandment is to love God. But God is not loved in the way we love potato chips or ice cream or a beautiful day, or even another person. The Bible is abundantly clear that to love God is to obey God. Now there is an idea that strikes fear into our hearts. Obedience. We don’t like to have to obey anyone. Jesus was clear, “If you love me, obey my commandments.” The witness of the Old Testament is consistently the same. It is not a case of having good feelings, or a desire or plan to get around to it next week, but simply obedience, right now. It is the Gospel according to Nike, “Just do it!” This is true because Christianity is an applied faith, not primarily a philosophy, an idea, or even a creed. These are things that describe it, but Christianity is first and foremost something we “do.” It is a way people choose to live. As the Second Commandment indicates, we Christians have chosen to live for others, we are to be a “serving people.” What Jesus wants us to know is that we find true freedom and joy and meaning in our lives only through obedience to God.

And Jesus is trying to tell us that our service, our obedience to God, is not just about going through the motions, but must be done with the heart and soul and mind. It is the focusing of the will, the spirit, and our intentions, on the actions we take in this obedience to God. Remember how angry Jesus got that day with the Pharisees? He called them “white-washed tombs,” telling them that they were all shiny and white on the outside, but inside full of dead bones. That is that they lacked the integrity for the good works they were doing. Their insides and outside did not match.

What we have to realize is that we are not to wait around until we “feel” like doing something. That is not the definition of obedience to God. It is our age and culture that has made “feeling like it” so important. The Summary of the Law refers to conviction, a sense of confidence in the rightness of what we do, having our motivation in line with our actions. That is part of what the Summary of the Law says. One problem is that some people stop there with the first part and think that is enough. In other words, they base their relationship with God on their belief that our sole task is to obey God.

My problem is that when I stop there, I soon become very uncomfortable because I realize that I am not very good at this. I sometimes do what is right, but if I am honest with myself, I have to admit that my reasons for doing it are not always the best. Sometimes I am absolutely convinced of what is right to do, but then I don’t follow through and actually do it. And every now and then I do get it right, I do get the intentions of my heart and the actions of my body lined up, but then there can be another problem. I find that my mind can tend to wander off in various fantasies of pride about what a swell guy I am for having matched my motivations to my actions so nicely. So, I find that I really have very little experience in loving God with all my heart and all my soul and all my mind. The Great Commandment is a hard thing to be left with. What Jesus said to the Pharisees does indeed sum up the law, but the fact is that it does not sum up our entire relationship with God. There is another major factor to consider.

For reasons that are quite difficult to understand as we observe ourselves in action, God loves us, and not in the cold contractual way implied by law. God loves us personally, intimately, eagerly, and uniquely.

The words of Scripture, the wisdom of the saints, the experience of our ordinary lives, and that little voice deep within us all affirm that. In Genesis we are given the image of the Creator fashioning life and calling it good, and then calling it very good, and then calling it very, very, good. Life is something that God deeply loves. That is what resurrection faith is all about, God will not abide the idea of death. Then, we have that wonderful image of the father of the Prodigal Son taking his coffee by the front door, looking down the road, keeping his vigil so that he can catch the first glimpse of our homecoming. We also have the insights of the psalmist who tells us that God knows our thoughts long before we do, and knows our sitting down and getting up. This is the God who is waiting for us whenever we choose to return to him. There is a rich warmth to the love of God. It spreads within us like hot cocoa on a bitterly cold day. Sometimes it wraps around us like protective armor and other times it is more like party clothes. It is the kind of joy that dances inside of us, the kind of light that we can read by or sleep under. It is what scholars call grace, but the rest of us know that it is the reason people smile. It is good, wonderfully good, the love of God is so good.

OK, here is where we get to the theology part. Here is where we begin to think about the way we think about God. A lot of people get this whole thing mixed up or backwards. Some seem to have a need or see an opportunity to choose between the demands of obedience and the comfort of grace, to choose between the expectations of God and the love of God. Unfortunately, those who choose only grace end up with a toothless faith, no cutting edge, something full of sentiment but without substance. And those who choose only obedience get a relationship with God that is all teeth, leaving them feeling guilty. Their image of God begins to evolve into something of a bully whose demands are new each morning.

The fact is that our relationship with God is a combination of the two, both law and grace. God's expectation for our behavior is there, and it is very real. We are accountable for the ways we conduct our lives. Our interior intentions and our exterior actions do matter. It matters to us, to others, and to God. But what we must never, ever forget in the midst of it all, is that we are loved with a love that dwarfs our efforts, our actions, and even our inactions. Nothing we can do or not do can ever change that love. God has chosen to love you and me. Think about that for a bit. God has chosen to love you and me just as we are this very moment with no limits or requirements.

Many years ago someone gave me a description that has helped me make sense of this kind of relationship. You know what it is like when a small child makes a picture? The picture is not ordinarily great art. I once received such a gift from one of my grandchildren and I made the mistake of saying, "Thank you, sweetheart, what a neat picture of a house!" She said indignantly, "Grandad, that is a horse!" As I said, a child's picture is usually not great art. But when a child comes up to us and offers it saying, "I drew this picture for you," it is offered in love. And when it is received in love, that picture is made perfect. It is made so perfect that it finds its way to the refrigerator to be proudly displayed for all to see. It is made so perfect that many of us whose children are long grown and gone still have envelopes and boxes holding those perfect pictures.

We live before God that way. Every day of our lives you and I make a picture of what life is all about. All of us together make a picture of what Christian community is about. We do the very best we can. Some of our pictures are pretty good. Others are really not very good at all. But, as people of faith we offer them to God, the good ones and the not so good ones, because he has asked us to and we want to. We offer them in love and they are received in love. I hope that somehow my pictures make it to the door of God's refrigerator.

In closing let me say that the Christian faith can seem very complicated, especially when we begin to argue about it. But we must never forget that every word Jesus spoke was about love, every word. No matter what our pictures look like each day, God's love for you and me and for every other person alive never falters. Imagine what our lives would be like if we lived as if we really believe that. Amen