

Today marks our final Sunday in our sermon series, “Learning to Love Our Enemies.” This morning I’ll be reading from both the prophet Isaiah and the Gospel of Matthew. In the book of Isaiah, the prophet is beautifully trying to reconstruct the understanding of the identity of those Israelites living in exile- as slaves- in Babylon. They have forgotten who and whose they are. Isaiah proclaims, in spite of all evidence to the contrary, that they are not the despised slaves of Babylon. They belong to no one but God. These are some of “the most comforting and profoundly transformative words of Scripture” (workingpreacher.org, Callie Plunket-Brewton). And in Matthew’s Gospel, Jesus’ authority continues to be questioned. Jesus was publicly confronted by some of the Sadducees, scribes and Pharisees in order to be discredited. In the story leading up to today’s passage, the Sadducees asked Jesus questions concerning the legitimacy of paying taxes to Caesar (22:15-22) and the resurrection (vv. 23-33). Jesus demonstrated his superior biblical knowledge as well as his irrefutable logic (FOW, Tim Beach-Verhey) and in doing so, he silenced the Sadducees. In today’s passage Jesus is asked another question that is a test about the law from a Pharisee, who is also a lawyer deeply versed in Jewish law (all 613 of them). Let us listen for a word from God but first let us pray. **PRAY.** Read Isaiah 43:1-4 and Matthew 22:34-40 (New Revised Standard Version). **READ.**

Reflecting on God’s love for us and on the two greatest commandments “invites all believers to examine what we think is at the heart of our faith and directs the way we live our lives” (*Connections*, Michael. E. Lee). In Jesus’ answer to the lawyer’s question, he gives two separate commands: the “greatest” is to love God with all your heart, soul and mind, which is the second part of the Shema, the standard prayer that all pious Jews are to recite

daily from Deuteronomy (6:5), and the “second” is to love your neighbor as yourself, which he quoted from Leviticus (19:18). “Jesus’ answer reveals that, when all 613 laws are boiled down to their essence, the remainder at the root of all of it is love, love of God and love of neighbor” (*Connections*, Theodore J. Wardlaw). Jesus put these two commandments in mutual relationship. Loving God finds its concrete expression in neighborly love.

In this sermon series, we’ve talked a good bit about Jesus’ command to love our enemies and what that may look like. Today, while this sermon could go in many directions, we now turn inward to explore the times when we are our own worst enemy. It is hard enough trying to make peace with those who have wronged us; sometimes making peace with ourselves is even harder. Perhaps no one else is trying to punish us for the things we regret, but we punish ourselves ten times over and hurt others in the process. Internalized shame and guilt can manifest themselves in many ways that harm ourselves and others. And there are also times when we just don’t think we’re worthy enough for God’s love or anyone else’s love. So how do we learn to love the enemy within?

Some years ago in the middle of the night I received a page to come to a patient’s room. As the on-call chaplain in the hospital, my job was to respond to any calls I received during the day and night. As I made my way into the patient’s room, I tiredly slid into the chair stationed beside the bed. There in the bed was an older man who had suffered from a heart attack. He was by himself and couldn’t sleep. I was there because I was told he had a question for me. I introduced myself, and Tom introduced himself. We made small talk for a while but then Tom blurted out this question, as if he

couldn't hold it in any longer. "Do you think God has forgiven me for all the bad things I've done in my life?" I answered him with another question: "What do you believe?" Tom went through a long, laundry list of why he didn't believe God could possibly forgive him much less love him. He had hurt people and made some really bad choices, but the most difficult was that he had lost his daughter in a terrible accident. Tom shared that the last time he saw her they had a very heated argument and hurtful words were exchanged. Though he didn't cause his daughter's death, the guilt he carried would often show itself in violent ways to others. Tom identified as a Christian but had strayed from God for a long time- his words, not mine. Looking at him, vulnerable, hurting, and afraid, I answered, "Scripture tells us time and time again that God loves you and has forgiven you through his son, Jesus Christ. In Christ, you're forgiven. The question is "Have you forgiven yourself?" We sat in silence, and the tears began to stream down his face, as the reality of these words and their truth settled into his spirit.

I'm going to call him Frank to maintain confidentiality. I met Frank some years ago as a college student. He is multi-talented, extremely intelligent and has a huge heart for the underserved. What people don't know about Frank is that he often feels unworthy and his thoughts go to battle in his mind with the fundamental church upbringing he had. After worship one day, Frank nervously approached me with his head down. I asked him what was going on, and he told me that he never had been baptized. We later met to talk about it, and he said that he hadn't been baptized because when he came of age to make that decision for himself he didn't feel worthy. Frank felt like he wasn't good enough to be baptized. One of the reasons he felt this way is he heard his pastor saying he was unworthy, and he hung onto

those words. I hugged Frank, and I told him that he didn't have to get right with God- if that were the case none of us would be baptized. Baptism says little about what you ought to be or do. It mainly asserts who you are: You are a new people. You are by God's grace loved, claimed, adopted, and anointed by God as God's own. You are who you are by God's grace.

Unfortunately, sometimes we forget or don't believe who and whose we are or we hang onto words that don't define us as children of God. We define ourselves by our circumstances alone, and we begin to believe that definition. Just as the exiles to whom Isaiah is speaking, who viewed themselves as despised slaves, some of us, at times, feel unlovable and unworthy of God's love and forgiveness. Isaiah writes of God's words to them and to us, "Because you are precious in my sight, and honored, and I love you" (43:4). The prophet Isaiah calls on the people in exile to recognize that no matter their past, they are loved and chosen by God. They are called by name. Just as we are. Isaiah doesn't say that God will form you, but rather that God already has formed you. Isaiah doesn't say that God will redeem you when you do such and such but that God has redeemed you. He doesn't say you will one day be God's when you...fill in the blank. Isaiah says that you're already God's. Now it's one thing to read or hear these words and nod your head with the preacher but do you really take them in and live them as if they're true?! Because if you really take them in and live as if you're really seen as precious and worthy by God, then we may also truly love our neighbors as ourselves and thus love God.

Though Jesus doesn't give any concrete instruction on how to love God, it cannot be separated from love for neighbor and oneself. These two

commandments are inseparable. When we choose to love God's people, we are always, at the same time loving God. It's the ripple effect- for loving your neighbor in the same way you love yourself grows out of and goes along with loving God with your whole self. It's interesting to note that here in Matthew "love of oneself is neither praised nor condemned but merely taken for granted. Love of God and neighbor receive the primary emphasis" (*FOW*, Gray). It's almost as if loving oneself is assumed here. There are extremes of loving yourself, and there are folks who love themselves a little too much; however, I wonder if many of us- I know I do- during seasons in our lives- struggle with feeling unworthy to the point that it effects our relationship with God and others. Yes, there's the basic understanding that we're sinful and therefore, we aren't worthy of God's grace, which is maybe what Frank heard his pastor saying. But that isn't the end of our story. God gives us the gifts of grace and mercy because God loves us. God sent Jesus to save us from ourselves and from our sins. Maybe loving yourself looks like fully grasping and trusting God's love for you through Jesus Christ?! Yet, at the same time we don't need to focus only on ourselves, as that's not the point here in Matthew's Gospel. Jesus' response here calls into question any ideas of the self that are so individualistic that they do not recognize our interpersonal natures- that we're one people. Therefore, loving yourself does not look like being unable to look outside of the self toward the other, for the sake of the other. Nor does it look like only looking out for yourself. It isn't the kind of self-love that is always turned in on itself. And loving yourself isn't making yourself your own beneficiary, in all places and circumstances (workingpreacher.org, Karoline Lewis).

“In quoting the Shema, Jesus points out that the aim of the law is to orient one’s entire life toward God. However, one cannot love God without loving what God loves! One cannot love God and oppress or exclude any of God’s creatures- even one’s enemies. Therefore, one who truly loves God will also love his or her enemies” (Beach-Verhey)...that includes the enemy within. As I mentioned last week, to practice loving kindness is our choice. And as you choose, think about the ripple effect of God’s love for us. “God choose to love Israel above all nations and to bring his love through this chosen people. To love God with all one’s heart, and soul, and mind, is to choose to respond to God even as God chooses to love us” (workingpreacher.org, Clayton Schmit).

“The point of the gospel is not that we love the ‘good people,’ and hate the ‘bad people,’ but that we love as God loves, inclusively, extravagantly. As Dorothy Day put it, citing her friend Father John Hugo, ‘we loved God as much as the one we loved the least.’ Such love, we come to see, is not a syrupy sentiment, but the hard work of self-sacrificially loving for the true good of another, who desperately needs to be loved” (*Mere Discipleship*, Lee C. Camp). Here is a simple truth of the Christian faith: God made us in God’s image and God loves us. We do not have to earn God’s love. In obedient response to that love, we’re asked to love God and others. God has equipped and empowered us to be God’s partners in doing God’s work in this world. Yes, “we make mistakes, or maybe we just feel unworthy; however, when we accept Christ’s forgiveness and love the enemy within, we live freely in the grace and mercy of God” (*Lectionary Sermon Series*, Vol. 2). Thanks be to God. Amen.