

Deuteronomy 34:1-12 ~ Matthew 22:34-40

*You Have Heard It Said: God Loves Those Who Love God... Really?* (1<sup>st</sup> of 4) ~ October 29, 2023  
22<sup>nd</sup> after Pentecost ~ Reformation Sunday ~ Confirmation Commissioning Sunday

The Rev. Dr. Laurie Brubaker Davis

### *Introduction to Scripture*

Okay class: this is a test. Put away your books, notes, and devices. Take out a sheet of paper and a pencil. You are going to have a pop quiz with just one question. And this quiz will count for 100% of your grade. Ready? ... Anybody's heart pounding? Palms sweaty? Mine always were. I was never a very good test taker.

That's the way this scene in Matthew 22:34 begins. Yes, we are still in the Temple on Monday of his Jesus' week on earth. He is *still* being put to the test. Again. Question after question, from his increasingly less than collegial colleagues who trying to topple his authority in front of the growing crowd. Instead, they seemed to be enjoying, this lively exchange. We are told they were "amazed" (v. 22) after last week's answer to the coin question; then after his snappy answer to the next trick question we are told the crowd was "astounded at his teaching" (v. 33). This was not going the way the religious authorities were hoping. Perhaps their palms were getting sweaty.

So next they bring back the big gun pharisees, including a lawyer, more specifically a canon lawyer who specializes in the Torah and Jewish law. They hoped he would pose a question that will finally expose this upstart Rabbi for who he really is. So, the lawyer asks the ultimate test question: "*Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?*" Mind you--by Jesus' time on earth, the original ten commandments, had proliferated into 613 commandments in Jewish law, (Fun fact: 248 of the commandments were positive, aligning with the 248 parts in the human body; and 365 were negative, one for every day of the year.) Yet, all 613 were considered equally binding. That's a lot of commandments, to remember, understand, and put into practice.

This type of question was actually quite common as a stimulating point of conversation, debate and even entertainment among Rabbis and other teachers of the law. But it was also practical. For a population in which copies of written texts were rare—the printing press was 1400 years away from being invented, and it would be another 500 years until ever present Amazon Prime with its tantalizing "buy now" button. Nor did many of them have the opportunity to learn to read. So being able to condense the essence, the core of God's teachings down to one commandment to live by, was crucial. Let's see how he did.

### *Sermon*

So, how did Jesus do on his one question pop quiz? A+. Crushed it! In fact we are told a few verses later (v. 46), "no one dared to ask him any more questions." What perhaps confounded them, was how Jesus' answer came from the essence of their shared Torah. Jesus' answer was not a contradiction, he actually presented no new teaching. Even the way he connects the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:4-6) You shall love the Lord your God with your all; to "You

shall love your neighbor as yourself (Leviticus 19:18) had been done already by other Rabbis. He was actually *not* the first to make this connection, as I was once taught.

What Jesus taught, what Jesus lived, what Jesus showed us was this: LOVE is the test and LOVE is the answer. LOVE is the rule and LOVE is about relationships. Quick survey: How many of you say that religion is about rules. Raise your hand. How many say religion is about relationships? How many say religion is about rules and relationships? I would vote for all three because it is about all three and so much more. Whatever line you try to draw around the love of God made known in Christ, will be too small, too narrow. Any line around divine LOVE will break the rule.<sup>i</sup>

It is important to be clear here. This kind of love, *AHAVAH*, in the Hebrew, nor is it transactional. Love divine not an if/then proposition. We are assured of this by the prophet Jeremiah 31:3, as he proclaimed to the exiles: *"I have loved you with an everlasting love."* What part of everlasting don't we get? Over time, the leaders of the church, like the Jewish leaders before them, made more and more rules. And inch by inch the church tried to make God's love transactional, quid pro quo. "Follow our rules and you will get to heaven." Then they tried to commodify God's love: "You must buy this indulgence to get your sins forgiven and guarantee your spot in heaven! Step right up! You want God to love you? Buy this indulgence today." Buy now, click here! This was the offence that pushed young man Luther, at age 33, to stand up and say, "this is wrong" we're breaking the Greatest Commandment!" So he pushed back with his 95 theses or disputations against the church he loved, to get it back to the core, back to the Greatest Commandment. On October 31, 1517. That's why today is Reformation Sunday.

Every time we draw a line that lifts up one group of God's children and puts down another, we contradict this commandment. And Jesus weeps. Like when we made laws based on the superiority of men over women; or laws that justified the chattel slavery of Africans, or laws that justified the systematic removal of indigenous peoples from their lands and denied them personhood; or laws that discriminate against persons who identify outside the bounds of heteronormative sexuality and gender identity; or laws that discriminate against people who are neurodivergent or who have physical disabilities. When we do, we are failing the test, we are violating Jesus' law, God's law. Love is the test and love is the answer. Every day, everywhere. It's that simple and that complicated.

You may be thinking, that's easy to say preacher, but have you read the news lately? What about the war between Israel and Hamas, the war between Ukraine and Russia, just this past week, the mass shooting in Lewiston, Maine. The deadliest so far this year---and the 563<sup>rd</sup> mass shooting in 2023. With all of these unspeakable events and the mass suffering going on at this very moment, how does the LOVE rule apply? I have one concrete example in the form of a letter written by Rabbi Holzman and his congregation in Reston, Virginia to the Muslim community, All Dulles Area Muslim Society (known as ADAMS) that had been using their synagogue for worship since 2008.

Following the Hamas' attack on the State of Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, and after the fatal stabbing of six-year-old Wadea Al Fayoume, a Palestinian-American boy who lived about an hour outside of Chicago, Imam Mohamed Magid of the ADAMS community asked Holzman if ADAMS should cancel their Friday prayers at the synagogue. The following is excerpted from Holzman's response: <sup>ii</sup>

*Dear ADAMS Community,*

*On behalf of the Northern Virginia Hebrew Congregation, we invite the members of the All Dulles Area Muslim Society to attend Jumma prayers at our synagogue building as you have done every Friday for over fifteen years. Earlier this week, following the Hamas attack on the State of Israel, Imam Mohamed Magid expressed his consolation and sympathy to our community and asked me to consider if Jumma at our synagogue this week might inflame emotions and whether we should take this week off. After prayer and consideration, this invitation is our answer to his generous and compassionate offer.*

*Yes, Imam Magid, in his wisdom and compassion, senses the pain and hurt in the Jewish community this week, and we appreciate his desire to cause no further suffering. However, we firmly believe that any cessation of our relationship would cause more harm for the following reasons:*

- *We do not want to support the notion that the conflict between Israel and the Palestinian people is primarily a conflict between Judaism and Islam. Both of our religions clearly prohibit violence against innocents, the taking of revenge, or the holding of hostages. We reject the idea that the Holy Land is meant for believers of any one faith. We affirm the teaching of the holy Koran that God created us differently so that we can learn from one another. We understand from the Torah's command to love the neighbor that we must first know the neighbor, and therefore we are meant to co-exist in proximity to one another.*
- *Extremists in the Israel/Palestine conflict use the cycle of violence and retribution to prevent the possibility of compromise and solidify the idea that our civilizations will forever be at war. We reject this tribalist worldview and believe that through our small, shared prayer space we demonstrate the greatness of human nobility. Our welcome is rooted in a desire to defeat extremism and the idolatry of vengeance.*
- *This week we welcome you in prayer as we do every week. Now is the time to elevate the universal experience of human grief, and set aside disagreements, no matter how well reasoned. Now is the time for healing of our souls, and we open our spiritual home in the hope that your Friday Jumma afternoon prayers will mingle with our Friday Shabbat evening prayers and provide consolation to the broken-hearted in both our communities.*

*Every week, when you come to our synagogue, you remove your shoes for prayer, which you conduct on prayer rugs on the floor. You might not be aware, but it is customary in a Jewish home, at a time of mourning, that the bereaved remove their shoes and sit on a low stool or on the floor. This week we seek comfort in the presence of each other and the mourners of Jerusalem.*

*L'shalom, tamid l'shalom (For Peace, always, for peace),*

*Rabbi Michael G. Holzman, Cantor Susan Caro, Rabbi Ashley Barrett, Elizabeth Lacher, President of the Board of Trustees*

This is a beautiful witness to what Love Divine practiced between a congregation of devout Muslims and devout Jews, can do, when put to the test. I don't know about you, but this letter between these two congregations in Reston, Virginia, gives me hope. Here in our Marshfield community, we are organizing an interfaith prayer vigil this coming Saturday, Nov. 4 at 4 PM -- with our local Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, leading it together. It will take place outside at Wenzel Plaza, or inside Chestnut Art Center, weather depending. In this time of testing, we are being called to rise to the challenge, to love God, neighbor, and self, however we can, right where we are.

Not even the superhero Moses, made it to eh promised land. But Joshua, the next generation did. *None* of us will experience the fulfillment of God's purposes during our short stay on earth. What we can do, what I hear Jesus telling us we must do, is live into the Greatest Commandment with all our might and muster every day we are given to live on this earth. Learning from our elders before us, adding wisdom and understanding that continue to transform us, passing on what we are learning to the next generation. Giving them what we can, the tools to build the future to which God is calling us. Teaching them how to be transformed and always transforming. So that they can carry forward God's dream beyond our lifetime. Today God has entrusted us with this work: so commission our six confirmands with the laying on of hands, strengthening in the Holy Spirit and anointing with oil, as they begin their confirmation journey.

The end of today's sermon will involve all of us getting up on our feet. But not quite yet. First, I need to tell you a quick story about Rabbi Hillel, who died just six years before Jesus was born. One day a certain gentile approached Rabbi Hillel and Rabbi Shammai, who were two famous rabbis teaching around Jerusalem in the first century. The gentile told the first rabbi, Rabbi Shammai, that he would convert to Judaism if the rabbi could teach him the whole Torah while standing on one foot. To which Rabbi Hillel replied: "What is hateful to me I will not do to another." All the law and the prophets hang on that commandment. All the rest is commentary.

Let's try it! Everybody, stand up and if you are willing and able, please stand on one foot and repeat after me, "**What is hateful to me I will not do to another.**" Beloved Community, I hear Jesus putting us to the test, asking "On what commandment do you hang *your* life on?"

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<sup>i</sup> <https://www.wilgafney.com/2011/10/02/torah-on-one-foot/> The survey idea and the explanation of AHAVAH came from this sermon.

<sup>ii</sup> shared with the *Outlook* by Rebecca Messman, pastor of Burke Presbyterian Church, Burke, Virginia. <https://pres-outlook.org/2023/10/interreligious-respect-and-care-a-virginia-rabbis-letter-to-a-local-muslim-society/>