

Lead With Love

TEXT: Matthew 22:36-40; 1 Corinthians 13

Preached by the Rev. Anne Robertson at Crawford Memorial UMC on June 9, 2024

Today is the kind of day when it's common to talk about leadership. We're honoring two of Crawford's long-time leaders, marking a new stage of leadership for a third, and also honoring those who are graduating from a variety of schools, many with hopes and dreams of what becoming a leader in their chosen field might look like.

But in calling this sermon "Lead with Love," I'm not just talking about that kind of leadership. I'm talking instead about the general way we lead our lives, whether anyone follows our lead or not, and whether or not our work is ever recognized by anyone outside of ourselves.

In this age of social media and engagement, it's easy to begin to think that our worth is based on how many followers we have, or how many people like something we post. One negative comment can erase our memory of a page full of praise. Falling into that kind of trap is not just easy, it's something actively cultivated by those who profit from encouraging that mindset in every aspect of our lives.

Part of that encouragement is the monetary incentive that ties our "net worth" and ability to succeed in our jobs to engagement metrics. Whether we are trying to find paying subscribers to a blogging platform, working to become an influencer on Tik Tok, raising money for a cause on GoFundMe, advertising events and services on Facebook, or trying to showcase workplace skills with peer recommendations and wise posts on LinkedIn—it's all based on finding followers, and then somehow monetizing that reach to rise through the ranks.

The forms of that kind of engagement have changed with time, and—dangerously—the indoctrination has expanded to include those well below and well above adults of working age, whose influence once was measured by the size of their rolodex. But the idea behind it is the same. It's a new way to reinforce the ancient lie that those with greater wealth and influence are better, smarter, or more deserving than those with less.

The Bible, in both the Old and the New Testaments, has plenty of stories that showcase the folly of that belief. But, at its heart—in the center of both Judaism and Christianity, whose origins fill its pages—there lies one core truth. Love is the real wealth. Love is all that matters because God is love.

If you go to a Sabbath service in a synagogue, you will stand at the appropriate time in the service and recite, in Hebrew, the passage from Deuteronomy that was our Call to Worship this morning. Called the "Shema" after the first word of the passage, the passage stands as a watchtower above every other Law of Moses.

Christians will recognize it as the first part of what Jesus identified as the Great Commandment. We find that identification in Matthew 22:36-40 that Neil read earlier when Jesus is asked, "'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' He said to him, 'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'"

The second part of Jesus' answer is notable because, in answering the question, Jesus said the second greatest commandment was "like" the first. In the Greek, that phrasing means the meaning is essentially the same as the first commandment. That second commandment comes from Leviticus 19:18, "Love your neighbor as yourself."

With Jesus not only putting them together, but saying they meant the same thing, Jesus is not just making a statement, he is giving us instruction. When we naturally ask, "Well, what does it really look like to love God with our whole being?" Jesus gives us the answer in the commandment that says the same thing, but in a different way: Love your neighbor as yourself.

The acts of love toward our neighbors as well as the ability to fully love ourselves are the expression, and the fulfillment, of our love of God. The second greatest commandment is just like the first, Jesus says. We love God *by* loving our neighbors as ourselves. They're not separate things.

Our love for God is not registered in the heavenly realms by our professions of faith, the enthusiasm of our songs and prayers, or how often we show up at church. Every act of formal worship is designed for one purpose only—to teach, encourage, and equip those who come here to go out from worship to love God by loving our neighbors as ourselves in the world beyond these walls.

That greatest commandment, put together from two passages of the Hebrew Bible, is all that is necessary for anyone to know and do. Jesus confirmed in Luke 10:28 that it is the way to eternal life.

The whole rest of the Bible gives us teaching and examples of what living the Greatest Commandment looks like in a wide variety of times and places. It also shows us the consequences when we fail to love God and our neighbors as ourselves: War, personal violence, greed, corruption, persecution, poverty, bigotry—and the Bible sometimes shows us the greatest blasphemy of all, which is when those things are done in God's name. Jesus names that as the one unforgiveable sin. Someday we'll talk about that more directly.

What has always struck me about the Shema, is the way God commanded that its message be conveyed. The command to love God with all our heart, soul, and strength is so critical that God ordered it recited every morning upon waking and every night before bed. It was to be attached to your forehead so that those looking at you would see it, and on the back of your hand so that you could see it. The containers Orthodox Jews wear on the forehead and on the back of the hand to contain those words are called phylacteries.

The command was also to be attached to both the doorpost of your house and the gates to your property, so that you couldn't go or come without seeing it. That's what's inside a Mezuzah, the container nailed to the entryway of Jewish homes.

There is no other commandment in the entire Bible, Old or New Testament, that has that kind of instruction from God with it. It is so fundamental, and we are so prone to acting in non-loving ways, that God orders its display and recital everywhere, every day, multiple times a day. Love. There is no need to fuss about posting the Ten Commandments. Get the *Shema* right, and the rest will take care of itself.

The only reason for all the other laws is that it's really, really hard to know what love looks like in any given situation. The man who prompted Jesus to tell the story of the Good Samaritan in Luke 10 understood that he was to love his neighbor, but he wasn't sure who actually counted as a neighbor. Jesus pointed out in the parable that everyone counted as a neighbor—even those we count as our enemies. That's by no means easy; but it's clear. Love everyone. Period.

What the Great Commandment brings into focus is that the command to love God with our whole being is fulfilled only when love of neighbor and love of self are in balance. The way that commandment was lived out in my family growing up detailed a hierarchy, not a balance. Love God first, then love literally everyone else in the world, and then, we ourselves came last. I was well into adulthood before I realized—wait a minute—that's not what it says!!

The first balance is that love of God isn't above love of neighbor or self. No, we express our love of God in the act of loving our neighbor as ourselves. And the second balance is that we are to love our neighbors in the same proportion as we love ourselves.

If we do lots of loving things for ourselves and don't give a flip about our neighbors, we don't need to do less for ourselves; we just need to love our neighbors at the same level. If we give and give and give to our neighbors but regularly abuse ourselves, we don't need to love our neighbors less; we just need to love ourselves in equal measure.

But here's the catch. We can't love by ourselves. Love is, by its nature, about community. Love never, ever, ever tells people they have to pull themselves up by their own bootstraps. When we think that love of God, neighbor, and self are separate things and that we're each separate entities responsible for keeping them in balance for ourselves only, we're bound to fail at all of it.

If someone is unable to love themselves, that's not "their" problem; it's "our" problem. If someone is too self-centered to care about their neighbors, that's not "their" problem; it's "our" problem. And until we join together

to solve “our” problems, none of us are able to fully love God with our heart, soul, and strength and the world will continue to go to hell in a handbasket. It’s all of us together or none of us at all. Take your pick.

To lead with love, means to lead every moment of our lives with love out front; to constantly ask ourselves if our words and actions are loving for our neighbors—every neighbor—and ourselves in equal measure. When love of neighbor and love of self are skewed, and a community works lovingly together to bring them back into balance, we call it justice. When they remain in balance, we call it peace.

What Paul adds in 1 Corinthians 13 is a way of identifying when we’re observing or practicing love and when we’re not; and his words are as lyrical as they are profound.

13 If I speak in the tongues of mortals and of angels, but do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. **2** And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. **3** If I give away all my possessions, and if I hand over my body so that I may boast, but do not have love, I gain nothing.

4 Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant **5** or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; **6** it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. **7** It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things.

8 Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end; as for tongues, they will cease; as for knowledge, it will come to an end. **9** For we know only in part, and we prophesy only in part; **10** but when the complete comes, the partial will come to an end. **11** When I was a child, I spoke like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child; when I became an adult, I put an end to childish ways. **12** For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known. **13** And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love.

How do you know if you’re leading your life with love? Look no further than 1 Corinthians 13. Are you patient? Are you kind? Or do you stray to become envious or boastful or arrogant or rude? Love “does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth.”

Are you still throwing tantrums as a grownup or have you put aside childish ways? Do you have the humility to recognize that you only know life from our own perspective and can’t see the whole picture clearly? Do you recognize that love is greater even than faith? The checklist is all right there.

My personal list is a mess; and yours likely is, too. But that’s not my problem or your problem. It’s “our” problem. We rise or fall together. Ironically, we lead our lives with love only when we lead equally with others.

Some of you will lead others in the future. Some lead others now; some have led others in the past. And some of you simply walk to the beat of your own drum, whether others happen to follow or not. But the one thing all of us lead, from our first breath to our last, is our own lives.

We can’t choose what happens to us; but we can always choose how to respond. The commandment at the center of the Bible’s teaching is that the way of God is choosing to lead our lives with love, wherever that takes us. Just put one foot in front of the other, and lead with love. Amen.