

22nd Sunday after Pentecost, Year C

16 October 2016

The Rev. Dr. Brian C. Wyatt, Pastor

Micah 6:6-8

Matthew 20:1-16; 22:34-40

So the Matthew text we heard this morning is kind of unique—you may not even realize it. But I think this is the *only* time in all of the Bible where Jesus gives a straight answer to a question.

You realize how rare that is? Jesus never, like EVER gives a straight answer. Usually it goes like, “Hey Jesus, tell me what I must do to inherit life?” And Jesus says, “there was once a man who lived in a village.”

So I’m all excited. Finally a straight answer. Love God with all your heart. Okay. But what, exactly, does it mean to love God with all your heart?

I think at least one biblical answer to that is to love what God loves. The first epistle of John is pretty much an entire letter devoted to just that idea. That *how* we love God is to love the things, the people, that God loves.

So, what does God love?

First off, God loves you. It may sound like a platitude, but sometimes we need that reminder. God loves you. And moreover, God loves you just the way God created you. You may have heard me share this before, but Karl Barth, one of the great theologians of the 20th century whose books occupy more than an entire shelf in my study, Barth said toward the end of his life when asked about his most important theological insight from all his years, he said it is this: "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." So God loves you. And one way to love what God

loves is to love yourself. Appreciate who you are and how God created you.

Another thing God loves? Other people. Like people you love, your friends and family; God loves them too. Your neighbors, even that annoying neighbor whose dog gets out and chews up your rose bushes; God loves them too. People you don't know, total strangers, even that stranger who threw his beer cans out the car window right into your yard while driving his muffler-less car at 2am; God loves them too. And even your enemies, real and imagined, the people in that *other* political party

– the completely oblivious ones who you seriously can't *believe* aren't voting the way you are, and then the real enemies like ISIS or Canadians or Methodists; God loves them too.

That last one gets difficult, so I want to invite us to sit with it for just a moment. What if I asked you, right now, to come up with a list of the people that you found it difficult, maybe impossible, to love. Maybe they are people you know about through media, maybe even presidential candidates; maybe they are folks you know personally. You don't even have to hate

them. But think about people that you cannot bring yourself to love. Try as I might not to, the truth is I can come up with some people to put on that list.

Who is on your list? I posed that question at one of our retreats a few years ago and just thinking about it generated some very intense feelings. We don't like to be confronted with the dark corners of our emotions. Sometimes those are dark corners we don't want others to know exist. But think about those people that You... Don't... Want... To... Love.

I'll tell you one of mine that's maybe a pretty safe confession

here. Westboro Baptist Church. You know that group that protests outside funerals of Catholics, Jews, gays, military members, and they stand outside of funerals with placards yelling hateful rhetoric at the loved ones of the deceased while they are trying to grieve.

God loves them. You know how hard that is for me to say? But God loves even them. God may not love the things they say and do, but you know what? Neither does God love all the things I say and do. But God loves Westboro Baptist Church. So I have to figure out, if I want to love God, how to love them too.

And that means that whoever made it onto your list, that God asks you to love them. Not just that God loves them, but that God wants you to love them. Because for us to love God means we work to love what God loves. And God loves our enemies. God loves the people we don't. And God wants us to love them, too.

Just that reminder, I think, is challenge enough for a sermon. But our other scripture reading this morning tells us a little more about what God loves. Micah reminds us that God also loves justice and mercy. Loves when we act with justice and with mercy.

Now justice is one of those tricky words – it has a different connotation in the Bible than in our normal everyday usage. Take, for instance, our justice system. That is a system built not on the biblical idea of justice, but on retributive justice. Making sure that people pay for their crimes, face consequences for their actions.

I'm not saying that's a good definition or a bad one. I'm simply saying it is different than what Micah is trying to get across. Whereas the Biblical concept of justice is that God has provided enough for everyone,

and it is our responsibility to make sure that everyone gets what they need.

God's idea of justice is the laborers in the vineyard where no matter how long they worked—a full day or a single hour—they are given the wages they need to survive.

God's idea of justice is that when God sends manna in the wilderness, there is more than enough for everyone to have enough food for the day, but when someone tries to take **more** than they need, rot and ruin ensues.

One of the metaphors frequently used for God in scripture is that of a

loving parent. When we refer to each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, we are extending that familial metaphor. And if you had the good fortune of growing up with a sibling, you may be able to come up with a time or two in which your idea of justice was different than that of your parents.

My parents both tried their best, I think, to help out both Jennifer and I whenever we had a legitimate need. But there were certainly times that meant that my sister got something I did not. And that did not *feel* fair to me. It did not *feel* just. If your system of justice is

predicated on everyone getting the exact same thing, like say paid x amount per hour worked, then neither my parents nor the owner of the vineyard were very just. But if your system of justice is based on everyone getting what they *need*, even if that means I sometimes get less than someone else, then that gets a little closer, I think, to the biblical view of justice. Which sometimes does mean that we need to make do with less so that our neighbor might have enough.

So when this Pharisee comes up to Jesus asking about the Law, and Jesus sums up

all the Law and the prophets with this first simple commandment to love God, that Pharisee shouldn't even have needed the second half. Because to love God is to love neighbor. Let me say that again – to love God does *not* mean being pious, or self-righteous, or thinking about all the ways *we* are better than *them*. To love God does not mean that we have every bit of merchandise that has a Bible verse or a picture of Jesus on it, or that we can quote more scripture than our neighbor, or that we only listen to the Christian radio station or watch Christian television. I'm not

saying those things are good or bad. But that is ***not*** what it means to love God. To love God means we love our neighbors, love our enemies, love ourselves, and work to make this world look more like God's kingdom.

Does that sound impossible? In complete fullness, probably so. But, can we get closer to it? I believe we can. As Marcus Borg puts it, "...for Christians who take the Bible and Jesus seriously, it is the only world worth dreaming about – and striving toward. Loving God means participating in God's

passion for that kind of world.”¹

Friends, let our lives
and our witness and
work, this day and
every day, be about
loving God, with all our
heart, with all our soul,
with all our mind, and
with all our strength.

Amen.

¹ Borg, Marcus. *Convictions: How I Learned What Matters Most*. pp. 171-172.