

Matthew 22:34-40

34 When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶'Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?' ³⁷He said to him, ' "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.'

Children's Reflection

During the children's reflection, I invited the kids to play a game with a [giant Jenga](#) set that is about 4 feet tall (as tall as some of them!). I let the kids get started playing the game while I told them that Jesus says the foundation of our lives—the part on which everything else is built—is loving God, loving each other, loving ourselves. If we build our lives on love, then no matter what happens, we can always trust that God will help us start again if things fall apart. While they were playing, I pulled out a block of three Jenga pieces and told them that I forgot that this was supposed to go at the bottom of the stack. I asked if anyone thought they could put this piece at the bottom without knocking the whole stack over. I then showed them that the only way to do it is to start a new stack with the foundation at the bottom and move over the pieces from the old stack one-at-a-time—hopefully before we knock the whole thing over!

I want to begin by confessing to you that I'm not sure I can offer a better way to understand this passage of scripture than what I told the kids about Jenga. It's really quite simple: the foundation of the world's religious traditions is love. Love God, love each other, love yourself. What's hard is keeping those in balance and challenging ourselves to love in ways that can't be summed up by Hallmark.

In 2016, Alain de Botton, the teacher and philosopher who founded the School of Life, wrote an op-ed in the New York Times that went on to be one of the most widely read articles ever published on the site. It was called, "Why You Will Marry the Wrong Person."¹ He says,

Naturally, we make a stab at trying to understand them. We visit their families. We look at their photos, we meet their college friends. All this contributes to a sense that we've done our homework. We haven't. Marriage ends up as a hopeful, generous, infinitely kind gamble taken by two people who don't know yet who they are or who the other might be, binding themselves to a future they cannot conceive of and have carefully avoided investigating.

My wife will gladly tell you that he's not wrong. What's the solution? Alain de Botton says that we should make it a standard practice for our whole society to begin every first date by asking, "And how are you crazy?" It's important that we understand his point: No one is perfect. *Real love* does not hang on the expectation of perfection. He says, "It is the capacity to tolerate differences with generosity that is the true marker [of love]." That's where I'd like to spend a little more time this morning.

Even if we didn't grow up in church or weren't part of a tradition that emphasized scripture, I bet most of us can still come up with something fairly close to the text of Matthew 22. "Love God with your heart, soul, and

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/05/29/opinion/sunday/why-you-will-marry-the-wrong-person.html>

mind (the Gospel of Mark includes strength), and love your neighbor as yourself." Most of us probably know this second part as the golden rule. Jesus didn't create this. He is drawing on two commandments at the heart of Judaism. The first commandment to love God is a quote from Deuteronomy 6, which says, "Hear, O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, and strength." This prayer, known as the Shema, is the most important prayer in a Jewish person's life to this day. Observant Jews say this prayer every day when they rise in the morning and go to sleep at night. The second commandment to love your neighbor as yourself, which Jesus says is like the first, comes from Leviticus 19. Warren Carter says,

The command presents not just an exhortation to occasional loving acts, but a societal vision. Leviticus 19 requires just human relations, including respect for parents (Lev. 19:13), provision of food for the poor and alien (19:9-10), no stealing, no lying, false dealing or swearing falsely by God's name (19:11-12), no defrauding or reviling of the deaf or blind (19:13-14), no biased judgements or slander (19:15-16), no hatred or vengeance (19:17-18).²

Christians are often taught to think of the Jewish Law as legalistic or overly complicated. In reality, the effort to follow all 613 commandments of the law is a person's expression of their love of God, love of neighbor, and love of self. To this day, the commandments inspire faithful people to commit all the parts of their lives to God and to embody the generosity, self-control, and dignity that stem from that love. So, Jesus isn't replacing the law with a simpler or superior version. Jesus understands that the core of his tradition is a vision for a world in which loving God, loving other people, and loving yourself are woven together like the strands of a prayer shawl—they cannot be separated without pulling the whole thing apart.

² Warren Carter, *Matthew and the Margins: A socio-Political and Religious Reading* (Marknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000), 445.

In the gospel of Mark, which is the earliest text we have about the life of Jesus, it's not the Pharisees who ask Jesus about the greatest commandment, but a single scribe who genuinely seems to be seeking wisdom. I'm reminded of the scene in the gospel of John when Nicodemus, a Pharisee, comes to Jesus seeking guidance and asks what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus tells him that he must be born again. The language of being born again has been hijacked by Evangelical Christians, but I think it can still be helpful. If you stay in any relationship long enough, you will have to be reborn. If I still treated my fifteen-year-old son the way I did when he was three, then we'd have even more arguments than we do already. In order to have the kind of relationship I desire, I have to pay attention to how he's changing, believe the best about him, notice when he's struggling, and do it over and over again. Relationships require attention, sensitivity, generosity, humility. Alain de Botton says, "Compatibility is an achievement of love; it must not be its precondition." My experience tells me that trust is also an achievement of love rather than a prerequisite. I have needed to be reborn many times in my commitment to this kind of love.

I work with a woman who recently moved to Green Bay from Chicago. You know that there's no love lost between Packers and Bears fans. I didn't grow up in Wisconsin or Chicago, so I don't have the same emotional attachment to one side or the other. I grew up in North Carolina, where every person must swear allegiance to UNC or Duke before they start grade school. This is a generational choice. My dad taught me to love Carolina, and once my son, Noah, was old enough to speak simple phrases, I taught him to say, "Duke is a diaper." Recently, my new colleague asked if many families trick-or-treat at our house because she's not sure what to expect. We live in a large neighborhood with a lot of young families, so the streets are crowded on Halloween. It's also election season, so it's very common for us to have political signs in our front yard on Halloween night. For several years, we've noticed a large number of

families—including some we know—go first to our next door neighbors, then trick-or-treat at the houses across the street, then continue down the block, skipping over our house completely. It could be that we give bad candy, and I'm open to that feedback! I think it's more likely that we've reached a point of such severe social division that people cannot tolerate the idea that their children's Halloween candy may be politically tainted. Faithful people *cannot* make trust and compatibility a prerequisite for love, but that is precisely what our culture pushes. This kind of social division turns people first into strangers and then into enemies. Jesus says in Matthew 5 that we must love our enemies and pray for those who persecute us.

Howard Thurman, mentor to Martin Luther King Jr., says in his book, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, "It is clear that much of modern life is so impersonal that there is always opportunity for the seeds of hatred to grow... Where there are contacts devoid of genuine fellowship, such contacts stand in immediate candidacy for hatred."³ He said that in 1949. How much truer is it today? Paul Tillich, often called the most important theologian of the twentieth century, says that love is the "drive towards the unity of the separated."⁴ I have a friend named Elad who lives outside Jerusalem and offers peace-building retreats for Israeli and Palestinian youth. Elad is an Israeli Jew. He tells a powerful story about being raised from a very young age to believe that if he ever turned his back on a Palestinian, they would stab him in the back to kill him. He spent a lot of time healing this trauma before he was able to work for peace. He tells a powerful story about a time when he was involved in a small healing workshop and he experienced a deep realization that he needed to work through his fear of turning his back to a person he had been taught to fear. In the workshop, he asked a Palestinian woman to stand behind him for several minutes with a knife in her hand. Elad says he wept through the experience as the terror released out of him. Deep healing often requires us to touch the bottom in our own pool of fear.

³ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1976), 76.

⁴ <https://semperdiscentes.life/2021/03/27/love-power-and-justice-a-review-analysis/>

Fear is most often what prevents us from living with the kind of love at the heart of faith. Fear is a natural response to unsafe circumstances. We wouldn't make it very long in the world without any fear. But, fear is too often a reaction against cultural differences, skin color, sexuality, and a host of attributes that may be better understood as the diverse manifestations of an infinitely creative God. That's why Alain de Botton is right to say that we must reorient ourselves toward what we want to achieve in love rather than what we require before we're willing to give it.

We're talking about a born-again kind of love. This kind of love involves risk and vulnerability. It contracts the distance between us in ways that can be deeply unsettling. We don't learn to love like this overnight, and it doesn't stick after one try. Jesus knows that Deuteronomy 6 is right: loving God takes everything you've got. Loving our neighbors and ourselves is the same, and we have a thousand opportunities everyday to try: when we look into the mirror and decide whether or not to love who we see; when we lose our tempers with people we love and have to choose whether we'll apologize or defend ourselves; when we're tempted to cross the street to avoid a neighbor who doesn't vote like we do; when we look around our church and do or do not notice who isn't represented here and what we may have done or not done to cause that. *We're talking about a born-again kind of love.* I can't say it any better than what I told the kids about jenga. Making love the foundation of our lives requires a reset. It requires a moment when we realize that we've been building on something else. We might have one hundred resets a day. But, we're talking about a born-again kind of love, so that's okay. God's gift to us is that we can keep coming back to ourselves, keep coming back to each other, keep coming back to God. As long as we make love our achievement, rather than our requirement, we can keep coming back to the love God has for everyone. Amen.