

Matthew 22:34-40
Deuteronomy 6:4-9

Grace Congregational United Church of Christ
October 6, 2019
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"You Shall Love"

Grace to you and peace from God who comes to us decisively in Jesus of Nazareth. Amen.

I think we forget, sometimes. We are here because of God. The United Church of Christ is important. Grace Congregational Church is important. The hymns and the music and the preaching are important.

But foremost, we are here because of God. God. We have many details to attend to in life. We have families, marriages and friends; we have education, houses and automobiles; we have politics and entertainment. Not the least of life's priorities is God.

Augustine said it best: the human heart is restless until it rests in God.

God is just a three-letter word, but the experiences of God through history are overwhelming. Take Moses, for example. The Hebrews years ago in history were made slaves in Egypt and they suffered under the severe edicts of Pharaoh. No mercy! They cried. And God took notice of them.

Think about God and Moses. Think about that bush that burns but doesn't get burnt up. Think about the voice that speaks from that bush. It's enough to make your hair stand up. "I need you, Moses, to go to Pharaoh." "Who are you?" "I am who I am." To know God is to shudder. To know God is to know we must attend to justice.

Think about God and those ten plagues. Think about the Red Sea dividing so Israel could pass through. And think about God's appearance on Mount Sinai: there was "thunder and lightning, and a thick cloud, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that the people trembled."

How could the people of Israel 'not think about God?' The revelations from God just kept coming.... But even with all those God experiences, people rebelled---they pushed back---the Israelites preferred to live indifferent to the presence of God. Enter now, the language of commandment.

"I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt....you shall have no other gods before me."

"You shall not make for yourself an idol; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God, punishing iniquities."

"You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the Lord your God, for the Lord will not acquit anyone who misuses his name."

The Ten Commandments are also known as the Ten Words. But the ten did not stop with ten. The commandments, with time, mushroomed.....

Some rabbis, as they count, say there are 613 commandments, others 611. 613 is the number generally agreed upon.

We have commandments about clothing and about food and about the sabbath; we have commandments about the poor and about daily prayers and the treatment of Gentiles; we have

commandments about marriage and divorce and forbidden sexual practices; we have commandments about the treatment of parents and business practices and about sorcery and what to do with criminals.

When I meet with the adult class tomorrow, I'm going to share a listing of the 613 commandments.

We're talking about God. The presence and the practice of God affect every aspect of life. Some things in life we can turn off once in a while, like a light switch. But the presence and practice of God enters into every moment of our lives.

We can't turn God off when we listen to the president. We can't turn God off when we think about the humans in other parts of the world who are as fearfully and wonderfully made as you and I are. We can't turn God off when we go to a movie theater or when we go shopping or when we go to work. Always we are in the presence of God.

I don't know what you think. I don't think 613 commandments is unreasonable. Our country has thousands of laws. 613. Now one of those 613 commandments is one that talks about godly living is the one you just heard. We call it the Shema.

"Hear, O Israel. The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might." Now you may know this, maybe not. Practicing Jews have a doorpost outside their homes called a mezuzah (Hebrew: מְזוּזָה "door) and attached to the doorpost is a piece of parchment with those words written on it.

When practicing Jews depart their home and when they come back again they touch the mezuzah in order to remind themselves: "Hear, O Israel, The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might."

A little story. A few years back, Al Gore was running for president. Al Gore chose as his running mate, Joe Lieberman. When Gore chose Lieberman to be his running mate, all kinds of reporters showed up at his home as he made his first public appearance.

As so he did. Lieberman eventually opened the front door of his house, walked out, and nonchalantly, casually, as if it was a habit engrained within him, he reached and touched the mezuzah outside his home. Some asked, "what's he doing?" Others understood the practice of touching the mezuzah.

You must remember who you are. You must remember what you believe. You must, you must, you must remember to practice your love for God.

Practicing Jews are expected to recite the Shema at the beginning of the day and at the close of the day, and they are also to remember those words when they leave the sanctity of their homes to engage the word: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might."

You shall love. That happens to be the title of this morning's sermon. You shall love. Now I spent the entire week with this scripture and I learned something that I never knew before.

When we talk about God and our relationship with God and how we want this relationship to mature, Deuteronomy 6:4 is the VERY FIRST TIME IN THE BIBLE that people of faith are commanded to love God.

“You shall love the Lord your God with everything that makes you, you.” And then Moses went on to say, command this to your children; recites these words with your children and talk about them when you are at home and when you are away, when you lie down and when you rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house.

613 commandments. One commandment has to do with love. Have you said to God out loud recently, “I love you?” When you grieve the death of a loved one, have you said in the midst of your prayers, “I love you, God?” When you suffer a financial set back, and fearfully wonder what the future holds, have you said out loud, “I love you, God?” When you think about the way you spend your money when you think about your regard for the poor, when you think about the things you have time for and the things you think you don’t have time for, have you said out loud, “I love you, God?”

What do you do with those three precious, life-changing, life-transformative, life-enhancing, life-blessing words, “I love you?”

Philip Sweet a number of years ago wrote a book entitled, “The Three Hardest Words.” You see, when we say those words----we cannot just say those words----but we have to practice lives that reflect the power of those words.

On a human level, “I love you” suggests that I am going to muster the forgiveness to forgive seven times seventy times. On a human level, “I love you” suggests that I’m going to devote my spirit, my intellect, and my energy to make those words real. On a human level, “I love you” suggests that no amount of disease and no amount of illness and no amount of difficulty will get in the way of my attempt to practice those words.

And on a God level? That is the million-dollar question! To say, “I love you to God” quite honestly changes just about everything.

When I say to God, I love you.....it means I can tolerate times of silence.

When I say to God, I love you....it means that we want to somehow give evidence of God in the way we talk and act in public.

When I say to God, I love you.....it means that nothing, absolutely nothing can separate us from God.

How did Paul say it, “I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.