

# The Law is Love

30<sup>th</sup> Week of Ordinary Time – Matthew 22:34-40

The religious leaders of Jesus' time are, once again, attempting to catch Him in the midst of a trap. They are sure they have found a way to discredit Him by challenging His knowledge of and loyalty to the Law. Jesus' response is simple and direct. The Law is love. It embodies a love of God and love of neighbor. It is that simple, and yet, underlying this teaching of Jesus is the challenge that these two simple commandments are much harder and more difficult to keep than all the other dogma, rituals, regulations or teachings of the time. The same is true for us today.

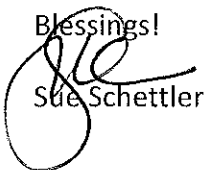
**“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?”** Given that there were 613 laws in the Torah, Jesus might have been challenged to pick just one. Instead of taking the bait of their trap, Jesus opens up an entirely new conversation. Instead of picking one, Jesus picks two. **“He said to them, “You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and the first commandment. The second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself.”**

The challenge that lies at the center of both of these commandments is that the origin of love is not an external practice or ritual. The origin of love lies within the interior life of each person. Love lies at the intersection of us and God. Love and hate might eventually be expressed in outward signs of kindness or hostility but the source of either one comes up and out of the very center of each individual human being.

The first part of Jesus' response comes from the daily Jewish prayer, *the Shema*, found in Deuteronomy 6:5. For Jesus, this prayer sums up our relationship with God, a relationship that is dependent on and aligned towards the Divine. The second part comes from the book of Leviticus 19:18b in which the love of neighbor embodies the act of loving one's countrymen. Jesus will expand this law to include love for our enemies as well. For Jesus, it is not the actions of a person, good or bad, that determines the value of another. Love must first and foremost embrace and accept the core dignity of human life. It is only in this context that love of the other can be achieved. This is far more difficult to practice than any ritual, fast or religious exercise.

For this reason, Jesus does not focus on fasting, alms giving or dietary restrictions as the most important part of the Law. He doesn't throw those out either. In fact, Jesus says, **“The whole law and the prophet's depend on these two commandments.”** If there is not first a love of God and second, a love of neighbor, then anything we do in the name of our faith has no basis or meaning. It ends up being a hollow, superstitious routine. Jesus is calling us to this way of life, a life that is fully conscious of God's presence in the human condition. The Law of God is first and foremost the Law of Love. Any prayer, ritual or action must first be grounded in and practiced out of a deep interior love for God and neighbor for it to take root and bear fruit in our lives.

Blessings!



Sue Schettler